Introduction

The short story (qīsa, ṭuṣṣāṭa) is a particularly vibrant genre in contemporary Arabic literature, and almost all major authors have at one point or another in their careers ventured into this field. The present collection provides the reader with a taste of the prowess of the masters of the modern Arabic short story. All except Najib Mahfūz, Yusuf Idris, Muḥammad Shukri and Muḥammad al-Zażāf are active to date.

Naturally, when putting together a reader of this type, it is not always easy to decide whom to include and exclude. The selection process involved many an hour vividly discussing the multitude of stories from which we had to choose. At the same time, we did not focus exclusively on an author’s most recent work; instead, we chose to include those stories that were most appropriate for the reader, and which had not been translated.

All too often, works of this kind, though claiming to represent Arabic literature in general, are decidedly “Eastern-centred” inasmuch as the focus is on Middle Eastern authors. As one of the aims of the present book is to provide readers with a sample of the best in modern Arabic short stories, we wanted to make sure that all areas of the Arab world would be represented, from Morocco to Iraq and the Gulf. Similarly, we also aimed to include both male and female authors, without, however, falling prey to “political correctness”; rather, the
The potential readership for this book is varied. Though the primary target audience consists of students of Arabic, the fact that each story is accompanied by an English translation makes the book accessible to all those interested in contemporary Arab fiction but who lack the language skills to read the stories in the original. There are ample notes following each story in which relevant language and cultural points are discussed, making this reader eminently suitable for both home and classroom use. The stories in the book can be used in core language classes as well as in a Modern Arabic Literature course at all levels. Although some of the texts may be too challenging for novices, they will provide good practice for more advanced students. We have taken this into account by arranging the texts in order of difficulty, the easier ones first. The added advantage to this graduated approach is that it enables students to chart their own progress and proficiency.

Anyone dealing with Arabic texts has to confront the issue of language variety in view of the diglossic nature of the language, i.e. the fact that there are competing varieties, linked to register, many of which are mutually unintelligible. As this is neither the place nor the occasion to enter into a disquisition on this controversial topic, suffice it to say that we have decided to include only stories written in the normative (supranational) variety, known as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), or fushā ( фоншэ ). At the same time it is, of course, impossible to exclude the colloquial (’ammiyya, dārija) altogether, since no Arabic speaker has MSA as his or her mother tongue, so it is only natural that in dialogue most authors render the language that is actually spoken. In those cases, the vernacular expressions are fully glossed in the notes with their equivalents in MSA. As a result, the book also offers highly interesting insights into the sociolinguistics of the colloquial and the interaction between MSA and the vernaculars, while containing interesting samples of colloquial expressions from all over the Arabic-speaking world.

All words in the language notes – including the titles of the books mentioned – are fully vowelsed, whereas the conjugation vowels of the imperfect tense ( انضمار ) of form I verbs are added in brackets, e.g. كَسَّ ( u ). If there is more than one possibility, both are given, e.g. نُفَتَت ( i, u ). So-called diptote forms are marked by a ذَمَم ( ), e.g. الْعَوْاصِمَ ( ). In all other cases, declension vowels are omitted, as is the "nunation" ( تنوين ) – the regular indefinite inflectional noun endings – except for the accusative singular in certain words, e.g. عَفَروُا ( عَفَروُا ) ( عَفَروُا ) ( غَنِمواُا ) ( غَنِمواُا ) ( غَنِمواُا ) ( غَنِمواُا ).

As texts and translation appear together, the language notes are, quite naturally, much shorter than they would have been had we opted for a traditional reader with only the original texts. Here, too, we have been led by a commonsensical and pragmatic approach, in that we have excluded comments on language points that the learner can easily find in standard translating dictionaries. Indeed, there is little point in simply repeating the translations that appear opposite the text! Notes were added for unusual meanings and/or cultural or intertextual references that were thought to be unfamiliar to our target readership. In this, we have been guided by our extensive joint teaching experience. At the same time we are fully aware that this process is to some extent subjective, and the results open to debate.

As far as the translations are concerned, we have taken into account the fact that the reader will primarily be used as a teaching and learning resource; as a result, an attempt was made to provide both an idiomatic translation and a crib for the student. All the translations are ours, except for the Qur’ān translations in the notes, which are those of M. Pickthall (1996).

The original texts appear in the way they do in the original publications, i.e. without any post-editing on our part, which includes, for instance, the often inconsistent vowel and declension markings.
Each story is preceded by a brief biography of the author, his or her key works and a brief background to the story.

Finally, we should like to thank the authors and others who have kindly granted permission to include the stories in the book. We are especially indebted to Salwā Bakr, Idwār al-Kharrāt, Fu‘ād al-Takarli, Zakariyyā Tāmir and Laylā al-‘Uthmān, who offered very useful advice on a number of issues and also provided us with biographical details.

Ronak Husni & Daniel L. Newman

Note on Transliteration

The transliteration used in this book is that of the Encyclopaedia of Islam, with the following deviations: kh = kh; k = q; dī = j; sh = sh; dh = dh.

The transcription does not reflect the regressive assimilation (المَدّة) of the lateral in the definite article al with the so-called “sun letters” (t, th, d, r, z, s, sh, ş, t, d, z, n), e.g. al-‘Saḥrā’ rather than as-‘Saḥrā’.

In line with common usage, ḥamza is not transcribed in word-initial positions, whereas the “nunation” (see the Introduction, above) is dropped throughout.

In the narrations of the short stories themselves, proper nouns and technical terms appear in their “recognized” – i.e. “broad” – transliteration forms in order to minimize “exoticness” in the narrative.
Abbreviations

CA Classical Arabic
coll. collective noun
dial. dialectal
ECA Egyptian Colloquial Arabic
ICA Iraqi Colloquial Arabic
fem. feminine
Fr. French
It. Italian
LCA Lebanese Colloquial Arabic
masc. masculine
MCA Moroccan Colloquial Arabic
MSA Modern Standard Arabic
pl. plural
pron. pronoun
sg. singular
SCA Syrian Colloquial Arabic

’Īzz al-Dīn al-Madanī

Born in Tunis in 1938, al-Madanī is one of Tunisia’s leading literary figures, and has been active in many different genres; his oeuvre includes novels, short stories, literary criticism and theory (see, for instance, his seminal essay 
الأدب التجريبي, “Experimental Literature”) and plays. He has been particularly prolific as a playwright, and one may cite, for instance, ديوان ثورة التجربة (The Revolt of the Zanj, 1983), set against the backdrop of the black slave revolt in ninth-century Baghdad; قرطاج (Carthage); مؤلفات السلطان الخفسي (The Hafsid Sultan), about one of Tunisia’s mediaeval dynasties; رحلة الملاح (Al-Hallaj’s Journey), about the famous Persian-born mystic theologian al-Hallaj (857–922); and على النهر الوافر (On The Overflowing Sea). He has also published a number of short story collections, the most famous of which are خرافات (Legends, 1982) and العدوان (The Aggression).

In addition to having been a special advisor to Tunisia’s minister of culture, al-Madanī has also been editor-in-chief of a number of Tunisian dailies and magazines. In 2006, he was awarded the Theatre prize for his entire dramatic oeuvre at the Doha (Qatar) Cultural Festival.

Al-Madanī frequently uses Arab history, folklore and classical Arabic literary genres as a spectrum through which he addresses contemporary issues such as governance and
power. One such example is the story presented here, حكاية القنديل ("The Tale of the Lamp"), which appears in the above-mentioned collection من حكايات هذا الزمان. The story contains all the author’s hallmarks inasmuch as it is an allegorical tale inspired by classical literature and loaded with intertextual references revealing al-Madani's wide reading. At the same time, the language used is sparse and formal, devoid of the embellishments one would normally associate with the genre. In spite of its setting, the events depicted in the story clearly have an underlying link with issues bedevilling present-day society.

The Tale of the Lamp
I found myself in Baghdad, yearning for the azad date...

...the story begins...
He said: “I’ve got to get food for my family. I just have to, even if it means going out stealing or killing!”

So, early one morning he left his house, armed with a knife. He walked close to the houses, looking around intently. The only thing he saw were the bodies of starving people piled up along the street, hordes of flies hovering around them. The red-hot sun beat down from a clear blue sky, while a scorching wind was blowing hard. What a horrible sight! Look at this miserable humanity! The poor man cried and wept. Was there any point to any of this? None!

So what was he going to take back home? Wax? Was he going to turn wax into food for the children? Were they supposed to chew on it until it melted in their mouths? Damn this age of injustice!

The man threw the wax into the house, and the mouths caught it. Then he returned to his shop, took a large sack and filled it with everything he owned: sewing needle, thread, some nails, a hammer, knife and the lamp that hung from the ceiling. He locked the door to the shop, secured it and said to himself: “Let me get out of this place and explore the wide world.” As the poet says:

**Alexandria is my home**

**If that is where I am.**

The man left his native land and everyone in it and embarked upon his journey, travelling day and night, week after week, month after month, not knowing what he would come across. He crossed deserts, wastelands and oases, encountering neither flowers nor animals. Then, he disappeared ... However, according to some storytellers, the man saw the walls of the city of Ghadamis appear before him, while others say that he continued on the Golden Road. The storyteller Abu Shu’ayyib Muhammad Bin Sulayman was certain that the man died of Faisal: “I’ve got to get food for my family. I just have to, even if it means going out stealing or killing!”
hunger and thirst in the Great Desert. However, Sahib al-Tayr Abu al-Barakat asserted that the man was observed by the pigeons of the city of Timbuktu in front of its walls. Whatever the case may be, let us assume that the man continued his journey, despite severe hunger, thirst and fatigue, since we do not want our story to end here ...

It was only with great difficulty that, on a crystal-clear night, the traveller reached the walls of a city made of red clay which had suddenly appeared in the bleak desert, much to his surprise. Excited, but perhaps also fearful, he knocked on the gate. A guard appeared, who said: “Welcome to the city of Timbuktu. You are among brothers.”

This allayed the man’s fears; he regarded this welcome as auspicious. He asked the guard for some water – for water means salvation – to wet his parched mouth. The guard said:

“Drink! However, one of the conditions of entry into the city is that you spend the night outside its walls. On the morrow, you may enter, provided you have a gift for our ruler, the Sultan.”

Then the guard disappeared, and the man remained alone all night. He wondered what he was going to do about this gift for the Sultan, since he had nothing in his bag that he could give. What could he do? Damn this age of injustice!

When the voice of the muezzin calling the faithful to the dawn prayer resounded, the guard came out of the gate and hurried to rouse the man, who was purposefully very slow in waking up. The guard took him first to the mosque, where the traveller performed his ablutions, which he also stretched out for a very long time. Then, he prayed, taking his time with the genuflections and prostrations and stalling his prayers. His heart was throbbing like mad, the pulses reverberating like a drum.

The guard offered him some dates and milk. After having eaten, the man was finally led to the palace. He felt as though
he were a prisoner of this kindness and courtesy, this merciless hospitality.

What would he give to the Sultan? The hammer? He would use it to smash his head in! The knife? He would slaughter him with it! The sewing needle? He would use it to sew his eyelids and lips! The thread? He would use it to truss him, saying: "You dog! You dare present me with wretched thread after we have treated you as our guest, honoured you and elevated you above ourselves! You dog!"

To which the traveller would retort: "May God protect me from the Devil!"

Finally the man found himself in front of the Sultan, who was surrounded by his retinue of servants. The Sultan rose from his throne and descended the dais to welcome his guest, saying: "Greetings. Welcome in our midst, esteemed guest." The Sultan then embraced his guest and kissed him, as though he was greeting a dear friend he had not seen in a long time. He bade the man sit next to him on the throne. The man continued to clutch his bag close to his chest, whereas the Sultan did not take his eyes off it. Suddenly, the ruler asked:

"Is that our present you've got in that bag of yours?"

All the members of the Sultan's entourage fell silent, agog in anticipation to see the wonderful gift for the Sultan.

The man mumbled: "Yes, my lord, this is your gift in the bag."

The Sultan shrieked with joy, while the man imagined his head on the chopping block. He put his hand into the bag, and hit upon the lamp. He took it out and gave it to the Sultan, who looked at it in wonder:

"What's this?"

The man said: "It's a lamp."

The Sultan was speechless, while everyone in his entourage craned their necks to get a better look at the object. Then the Sultan said: "A lamp?"
“Yes, my lord – a lamp made out of copper.”
“What does ‘lamp’ mean?” enquired the Sultan.
The man replied: “It is a device made of copper, with a wick and a little bit of oil.”
The Sultan asked: “What does it do?”
“It gives light.”
With increasing amazement, the Sultan asked: “It gives light just like the sun or the moon?”
“It lights up the world when the sun has disappeared and it is cloaked in darkness.”
The Sultan was quite taken aback. “So, this is a piece of live coal from the sun?”
The man replied: “If you wish, my lord.”
As the Sultan gazed at the lamp, turning it every which way, he said: “Does it give light at this moment?”
The man replied: “No, it’s not giving off any light at the moment, my lord. Let me light it.”

With a magical movement the man ignited the lamp, and light suddenly began to spread throughout the hall, leaving the Sultan quivering, almost fainting with joy and glee. The members of his entourage were clapping their hands and cheering, praising God for His munificence. The Sultan took the man to his side, grabbed the lamp and proceeded towards the window looking out onto the streets of the city. Lo and behold, they were thronged with people eager to know about the Sultan’s gift. Then, the Sultan cried out:
“This is the lamp!”
The crowd cheered, their eyes glued to the lamp:
“Long live the lamp! Long live the Sultan! Long live the lamp!
Long live the Sultan!”
The Sultan then kissed his guest and said to him: “We didn’t know about the lamp, and thanks to you, our esteemed guest, we’ve learned something that we didn’t know. You’ve lit up our darkness. You’ve let the sun into our world, and for this, I’ll make you a minister!”

The man said: “My lord, I am but a commoner, a God-fearing man. I enjoy peace and tranquillity and wouldn’t know how to advise a Sultan.”

However, the Sultan insisted, upon which the man said: “My lord, I implore you to relieve me from this post. I’ll be a faithful servant and devoted friend.”

The Sultan exclaimed: “Outstanding! Bravo!” Then the Sultan ordered the Treasurer to come to him. When he arrived, the three of them went to the Treasury.

The Sultan said to the traveller: “Take what you like from these worldly goods and improve your situation with it!”

The man grabbed as much jewellery, pearls, diamonds and other precious stones like coral as his bag could take. Then the Sultan bade the Marriage Judge of the city of Timbuktu to come to him immediately. When he arrived, the Sultan said to him:

“I am going to wed this man to my daughter Zubeida. I want you to write the marriage contract, and be quick about it!”

The Sultan then dressed the traveller in a gold-embroidered silk robe of honour and guided his guest to the princess in the presence of the courtiers. When the man saw his bride-to-be, he thought she was the most beautiful girl his eyes had ever beheld. She brought to mind the words of the ancient poet:

My night, this bride is one of the Zanj
Adorned with pearl necklaces.

The Marriage Judge said: “Forsooth, I’ve never seen anyone as beautiful as Zubeida, nor anyone as tender, fragrant, slender or more delicate. She is like musk and amber, silk and velvet, like a flower and jasmine. It is time to draw up the marriage contract!”

The man made thousands of lamps for the Sultan, his courtiers and all the people. He hung them everywhere: in the palace, the mosques, the schools, streets, squares and houses.

 وقال السلطان: «يا سلطان، نعم، تعال!»
ثم أمر السلطان بإحضار صاحب بيت المال. فلما حضر، ذهب ثلاثينهم إلى الدوائر.
فقال السلطان للرجل: «تناول ما شئت من وسخ الدنيا فأصبح به». كانت يدتيه حتى ملاً جرابه. ثم أمر السلطان بإحضار قاضي الأندلس.
فعرف الرجل الجواهر واللؤلؤ والعاج والخمر والزبرد والمرجان وكلتاه يدته حتى ملاً جرابه. ثم أمر السلطان بإحضار قاضي الأندلس.
فلمَّا حضر قال له: «هذا الرجل أزوَّجه ابنتي زبيدة. فكثب عقد النكاح على عجل!».
ثم خلف عليه السلطان خلعة من الدمغة والخمر موقَّعة بالذهب، وأدخله نفسه وبحضور الحاشية على ابنته. فوجدها الرجل عروسًا من أجمل ما رأى... فهي كما قال الشاعر القديم، الله درهُ:
لبهني هذه عروس من الزبَّج عليها قلائد من جمان
وقال قاضي الأندلس: «والله إنني لم أرأّ جمالًا من زبيدة، ولا أرخص منها، ولا أعطر، ولا أضاء، ولا أرق، فهي مسك وعطر، وهي حريمة وغملة، وهي ورد وياسمين. والله لقد تنهدت وقت كتابة العقد!».
وصنع الرجل للسلطان للحاشية وللناس أجمعين ألف ألف قنديل، علمته جمعاء في قصر المدينة، وأسواقها، ومصادرها، ومدارسها، وشوارعها، ومسطحها، وبويتها. ووضع عليه ألف وقائد من الزنوج المرد حتى غرفت المدينة وسكنها في النور ليلًاً ونهارًا. وعاش صاحبنا في العيشة والعصيدة، وطالت له الحياة سنوات طويلة لا يعلم عدها إلا الله تعالى، إلى أن... نعم، إلى أن بدأ يحمل إلى وطنه، ويشتاق إلى رؤية عباه وأهله. ورأى
And so the traveller left the bright lights of Timbuktu for his native land, under the protection of God the Almighty. As soon as he and his caravan arrived in his native city, people began crowding around him to grab his possessions; soon fights erupted over them, and they even began to kill each other. The mob attacked the camels, the horses, mules and donkeys with knives and ate them all. The traveller enquired what was happening, and was told: “The people in the city haven’t had anything to eat for about twenty years.”

He remembered his famous saying and former indignation, and said: “Damn this age of injustice!”

There was another man there, sitting motionless, observing the dreadful spectacle. Then he looked at the traveller. His eyes alternated between the terrible scene and the traveller, who was still sitting on his camel and staring at the humanity milling around like a swarm of locusts. Finally, the man got up and greeted the traveller. He said:

“I know you. You used to work as a cobbler, and your shop was next to the shrine of Moulay Muhammad al-Dakhil. My shop was opposite yours. I used to repair sandals. My shop used to be next to the shrine of Moulay Muhammad al-Kharij.
You must remember me by now. Tell me, honestly, how did you manage to acquire such wealth? What have you been doing? Tell me, since we work in the same trade. I was your neighbour in the souk, and your companion on the day you started in the profession. Which country did you travel to in order to collect all these fine things? Tell me, for I am keen on bread and meat, silk, women, gold, tranquility and sweet dreams. Save me from the pain and misery of this age of injustice!"

The traveller replied: “Leave this land, my friend, and follow the road until its end. There, you will find a city, and one of the conditions for entering it is that you offer a gift – any gift – to its Sultan. And the strange thing is that they reward you for it, too! As you can see, it is quite simple.”

So the other man left his country in search of the good life, meat, silk, women, gold, tranquility and sweet dreams. He travelled until the end of the road and crossed the desert until, one clear night, he arrived at a city made of red clay, like Marrakech or Tozeur, which had suddenly sprung up in the middle of the desert.

He knocked on the gate, after which a guard came out and greeted him in the most splendid fashion. The following morning, the guard woke him up and said: “Do you have a gift for our lord the Sultan?”

The man immediately answered: “Yes, I’ve got a gift in this bag.”

The man quickly went through his ablutions and prayers and hastened to the palace, hurrying in to meet the Sultan and his entourage. He quickly prostrated himself and kissed the ground before the Sultan. When he raised his eyes he saw that the Sultan was barefoot, as were all the courtiers, including the guard who had brought him in. He rose from the ground, slipped his hand into the bag, and took out one of the most beautiful and best sandals that had ever been made in the city of Fès since its foundation.
Surprised, the Sultan asked him: “What’s this?”
“This sandal is a gift for you my lord.”
The Sultan asked: “What’s it for?”
The man answered: “It is to be worn as follows.”
Thereupon the man took a few steps in the sandals. The Sultan was extremely pleased with this, and the courtiers all applauded.
They called out:
“Long live the sandal! Long live the Sultan! Long live the sandal! Long live the Sultan!”
The Sultan then went up to the man and said: “This is a most wonderful present you’ve given me, and it merits the greatest reward!”
The Sultan then ordered the Treasurer to come, and when he arrived, the Sultan told him: “Return whence you came.”
The courtiers were surprised at this.
The Sultan said: “This man deserves a better reward than mere filthy lucre.”
He turned to the man, and said: “Esteemed guest, please raise your eyes towards the ceiling.”
The man lifted his head.
The Sultan asked him: “What do you see?”
The man replied: “I see a lamp.”
“Behold the reward for your gift!”
Language Notes

1. المَتَّى: extract from the opening line of the so-called مَقَايِسَةٌ بَعْدَاءُدُ, composed by the Persian-born Fāris al-Hamadhānī (968-1008), who is credited with the invention of the مَقَايِسَةٌ genre (lit. “standing”, but usually translated as “session” or “assembly”), which consists of social vignettes recounted in razor-sharp, eloquent rhyming prose سَجَعُ. The مَقَايِسَاتُ are also a cornucopia of rare and archaic words.

The genre was further developed by Abū Muḥammad al-Qāsim Ibn al-Ḥarīrī (1054-1122).

2. الزَّريْعَةَ الأَبْيضُ (“the white lily”), it is a type of date (تَمَّرٌ) known for its exquisite taste.

3. عَفوًا: the usual meaning of this term is “Excuse me!” or “Don’t mention it!” (in response to شُكرًا, “Thank you”). However, it can also mean “of one’s own accord”, or “spontaneously” (cf. عَفُوٌّ, “spontaneous” and عَفُوَيْنِ, “spontaneity”).

4. وَلَلّٰهِ أَعْلَمُ: this formula, which literally translates as “God knows best” or “(Only) God knows”, is traditionally used to express doubt regarding the veracity of a statement.

5. المَلْحَةُ والجِفَافُ: in this example of lexical repetition all three words denote “drought”, with فُحْطُ having the additional connotation of “dearth”, or even “famine”.

6. تُحْفَاعًا اللّهُ: lit. “May God spare us”; it is used when someone is faced with a particularly dire prospect.

7. العَروَاصُ: sg. عَروَاصَةٌ; the modern word for “capital (city)”, but used in the past for any major urban centre.

8. المَغْرِبُ: this term, which currently refers to “Morocco”, used to denote the Islamic lands in the west (المَغْرِبُ, “the place where the sun sets”). Note that in English, “Maghrib” tends to be synonymous with “North Africa” (i.e. Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria and Libya).

9. القَرْوَانُ: a town (and governorate capital) in central Tunisia, approximately 150 km from Tunis. An old centre of Islamic learning, Kairouan is the site of the first mosque in northern Africa (or أَفْرِيقَى), and was the first Islamic capital of the region (and a base for military expeditions).

10. فَاس: the traditional capital of northern Morocco, Fes (or Fez) boasts the oldest university in Morocco, dating back to the mid-ninth century and the famous قُوْرِيْنِ mosque. Between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, Fes was the undisputed political, economic and intellectual centre of the entire region. The town also achieved great fame as a religious centre.

11. سَجُلْماَة: the ancient capital of the بَنْفَالَة district, situated some 300 km from Fes, it acted as the gateway to the desert and was also the centre for a number of Moroccan dynasties. Today, only ruins remain of this most evocative of sites.

12. القَفصَة: a town in Tunisia some 350 km southwest of Tunis. Its name is derived from the Arabicized form of Capsa, which was the name of the Roman settlement on that site. After playing a considerable part in the country’s history, (even including a short independent spell in the eleventh and twelfth centuries), Gafsa (its current Latinized form reflecting the local pronunciation of ق as /g/) dwindled into oblivion.

13. المَهْدِيّة: a Tunisian town and provincial capital (named after its founder, c. d. 934 AD), located on the coast some 200 km south of Tunis.

14. صَبَار: “cactus”, “Indian fig” (or “tamarind”). However, there is also a possible play on the homographic صَبَر (or صَبَار), meaning “(smooth) stones” in Classical Arabic.

15. الحُشَائْـشُ (coll.), which, in addition to “herbs” or “grass”, also denotes “hemp” (cannabis).
16. وُقِبّنا اللّهُ وَإِياکُم: lit. “May God preserve us and you (from imminent evil).”

17. الرَّضُوْنَ كَثِيرًا لا يَفْتَنَ: this is a reference to the fixed expression “contentment is an everlasting treasure”

18. النَّعَال: sg. أَنْعَالُ (أل. أَنْعَالُ), originally denoted “sole”.

19. مَرْضَة أَبِي العَانِي: this Fès-based school was founded in the fourteenth century.


21. نَحْل: lit. “corner” (of a building) originally meant the cell of a Christian monk (also صَوْفَة). In Islam, it refers to a small mosque (which in many cases houses a saint’s tomb), prayer room or (especially in the Maghrib) a building for members of a brotherhood (طْرَقَة).

22. سَقْفَة: pl. سَقَافُ (سَقَفَيْنَ), originally the roofed portion of a street.

23. كَحْل: this is the feminine form of كَحْل (“black”); especially referring to eyes, with the plural form كَحْل being homonymous with “antimony”; كُحْل (pl. كَحْل).

24. أمِير الموتَيْن: this was the traditional title of caliphs in Islamic history.

25. اسماعيل المنصور الشيوعي: Mawlāy Ismā‘īl b. al-Sharif Abū l-Naṣr, the second sultan of the Alawid dynasty, who reigned for fifty-five years, between 1672 and 1727.

26. إِلَّا عَلَى رَبِّي: this is a Qur’ānic phrase: رَبِّي إِلَّا عَلَيْكُمْ (“Return unto thy Lord, content in His good pleasure”

27. فَنُورَتُهَا: this is a typical example of a type of word play in Arabic, in which the same root reappears in different guises.

28. العَالِم: sg. عَالِم (عَالِم), lit. “dependents”.

29. أَرْض الله وَأَسْعَة: lit. “God’s Earth is wide”, this expression

30. لَوْ قُرِّبَ فِيها قَارِئٌ: which has the following famous opening lines:

31. قَفَّ: sg. قَفَّ (“desert” or “wasteland” (also, see below, صحراء).

32. بَرَاء: sg. بَرَاءة, “open country”.

33. وَد: sg. وَدِيّان.

34. صحَراي: pl. of صحَر (indef. pl. صحْرَاء), which, depending on the location, can be translated in English as “desert” or “Sahara” (also in Arabic الصحَراي الكَبْرِي). Note that صحَرْاء is grammatically feminine.

35. تَمْدِيمَ: a small oasis in the Libyan Sahara, near where the Libyan, Algerian and Tunisian borders meet. It owed its former prosperity to its position as a hub in the trans-Saharan trade.

36. خَمَامُ: pl. of خَمَام, which can denote either “pigeon” or “dove”.

37. قَفَّ: sg. قَفَّ (قَفُّ). Also قَفَّ: pl. of قَفُّ. عَامَع (u “to patrol by night”) Although this form can only be adjectival (meaning “spending the night patrolling”), it is nominalized here to “one who patrols at night”, i.e. a “guard” or “night watchman”. This also betrays the author's origins, as the private guard to the Tunisian ruler, the Bey (بَيْي), was known as العَمَام.


39. وَضْوء: lit. “cleansing” (cf. تَوُضَّاء), the obligatory (minor) ablution to be performed by Muslims prior to prayer. It generally involves washing the face, hands and feet, rubbing
the head, rinsing the mouth and washing the ears. This is contrasted with the “major” ablation (in order to remedy a state of “major” impurity such as after intimate relations, menses), i.e. غسل, which refers to washing the entire body in ritually pure water. The full ablation is also performed on corpses.

41. the verbal noun ركعت (مصدر) of ركع (أ), “to bow”, “kneel down”. The individual acts of bending are known as ركعات (أ) (pl. ركعات).

42. سبأ: verb denoting the uttering of اللهم الرحمن الرحيم (“In the Name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful”). The formula is normally used at the beginning of the recitation of the Qur’an or any activity. Other such formula-based verbs include حمَّل “to say لَاتَّوَالَ وَلَا فَوَّةٌ إِلا بِاللَّهِ” (“There is no power and no strength save in God”); الحمد, to say الحمد لله (“Praise be to God”); سمى, to say اسم (“In the name of God.”)

43. مجدود (ع) “to bow down”, “prostrate oneself” during prayer; it is also the plural of مساعد (“prostrate [in worship]”). The individual prostration is known as مسجدة (pl. مسجادات).

44. يَسْتَحِيح: is the the مصَدَر of مَسْتَحْيَة, and refers to the part of the prayer during which the worshipper utters the phrase سُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ (“Praise the Lord!”).

45. ذكر الله تعالى: lit. “mention of God the most High”; in prayers and worship, it refers to the repetition of the phrase الله تعالى. In a صَفِّ context, ذكر is associated with the constant repetition of words and formulae, often accompanied by dancing, which induces a trance-like state.

46. ضرب(ب)، a musical instrument resembling a tambourine.

47. الشياطين والخيل: this is the traditional offering to welcome a guest (especially in North Africa).

48. أعوذ بالله من السُيِطَان الرجيم: this formula is used when faced

with a particularly heinous sight or occurrence. It may be compared to the English “Get thee behind me, Satan!”

49. حوائش (pl. حوائش) in addition to the meaning in this text, this word also denotes “commentary” (in the margin) of a book.

50. جملة أتْهُم وبرزتْ سهلًا: an expansion of the traditional greeting أتْهُم وأتْهُم وأتْهُم (said by the host), which literally means “(you are among) kinfolk and on level (i.e. hospitable) land”. The expression here literally means “you have stopped among your people and you have descended upon a plain”. There are a number of variants, the most common ones being جملة أتْهُم وأتْهُم وأتْهُم ("You have come to a people who are like kinsfolk and to a place that is smooth and plain") and جملة أتْهُم وأتْهُم وأتْهُم ("You have come to your people and you have tread onto a level plain").

51. يا لله: lit. "by God" (in the sense of "I swear"), this expression is used profusely in Arabic in a wide variety of contexts, e.g. "I swear"; "Believe me"; "No kidding".

52. لا إلَه إلا الله: "There is no God, other than God".

53. الله أكبر: "God is great". Also see note No. 42.

54. جماعة, "group" (which gave us جماعة, جماعات, "republic"), it initially denoted "a group of people" or "main part of the people" (or, indeed, the chief part of anything).

55. العامة: lit. "the common folk", vs. الخاصة (lit. "the special ones"), "the elite".

56. ديوان "chancery" or "council of state"; ديوان originally referred to official records or register (دُوَّان, "to record"), and then to the place where the records were kept). The same word also denotes a poetry collection.

57. النكاح ("marriage"), with عقد النكاح denoting "marriage contract" (in the East, the usual expression is عقد الزواج).

58. دُرَّة: lit. "his achievement is due to God" (ذَرَّة).
Zakariyyā Tāmir

Zakariyyā Tāmir (Zakariya Tamer) was born in 1931 in Damascus, Syria. One of Syria’s most famous writers, he is particularly renowned for his short stories, many of which have been translated into numerous languages. In addition, he is also one of the Arab world’s leading authors of children’s stories.

Tāmir’s stories often deal with injustice and opposition to social and political oppression. He was forced to leave school in his early teens to support his family, and continued his education at night school. The hardships he experienced in his early life no doubt provided inspiration for his literary work, in which he gives a voice to Syria’s poor and dispossessed.

He published his first collection of short stories, صهیل الجُواد الأبيض (The Neighting of the White Steed), in 1960, while working as a blacksmith in a foundry in Damascus. The immediate success of the book allowed him to embark on a new career as a government official, while editing several periodicals like al-Mawqif al-Adabi (The Literary Stanza), al-Ma‘rifa (Knowledge) and the children’s magazine Usāma.

Tāmir was one of the co-founders of the Syrian Writers’ Union in 1968, and its vice president for four years. After losing his position at al-Ma‘rifa following the publication of politically controversial extracts from works of the famous nineteenth-century reformer ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Kawākibi, Tāmir left his
homeland in 1981 and settled in London, where he edited a number of publications while writing articles for the newspaper al-Quds al-Arabi (1989–94).

Among his many collections of short stories, one may cite الرغد (The Thunder, 1970); ربيع في الرماد (Spring in the Ashes, 1963); لماذا سكت النهر (Why the River Fell Silent, 1973); فالنتو وردة للستونو (The Flower Spoke to the Bird, 1978); المومور في اليوم العادر (Tigers on the Tenth Day, 1978; English trans. 1997); نداء نوح (Noah’s Summons, 1994); ستضححك (We Shall Laugh, 1998); and القطة (The Hedgehog, 2005).

The following story is an example of how superstition sometimes serves as a tool to dominate and exploit women in traditional societies. Aziza is a beautiful, naive young woman who is concerned that her husband is on the verge of remarrying another woman. In desperation, she resorts to visiting a sheikh who pretends to know how to undo the magic spell Aziza is allegedly under. This is a tale of deceit and a loss of innocence.
Aziza was a beautiful girl with a fear of black cats. She looked worried the moment she sat down in front of Sheikh Said. His eyes were jet-black and fiery. They closed in on Aziza, who was trying to ward off an ever-increasing panic, exacerbated by the smell of incense rising from a copper dish, which filled her nostrils and slowly numbed her body.

Sheikh Said said: “So, you want your husband to return to you?”

“I want him to return to me,” Aziza replied, hesitantly.

Sheikh Said smiled as he added, mournfully: “His family wants him to get married again.”

He threw bits of incense into the dish filled with live coal, and said: “Your husband will return to you, and he will not take another wife.” His voice was sedate and soft, and soothed Aziza, who heaved a deep sigh of satisfaction. The Sheikh’s face lit up. “However, my work doesn’t come cheap,” he said.

Aziza’s face dropped. Staring at the gold bracelet on her wrist, she said: “I’ll pay you what you want.”

The Sheikh grinned, and said: “You will lose a little, but you will regain your husband. Do you love him?”

Aziza angrily muttered under her breath: “No, I don’t.”

“Did you have a fight with him?”

“I quarrelled with his family.”

“Does your chest feel tight?”

“I sometimes feel as if I have a heavy weight on my chest.”

“Do you have any disturbing dreams?”

“At night I always wake up from my sleep, frightened.”

Sheikh Said shook his head several times and said: “Obviously, your in-laws have bewitched you.”

Aziza was gripped with fear and shouted: “What can I do?”

ووقول الشيخ سعيد: "أذن تريد أن يرجع إليك زوجك؟<br> أجابت عربية تتردده: "أريد أن يرجع إلي".<br> فابحسم الشيخ سعيد بينما أدرفت قائلة باكتتاب: "أهله يريدون تزويجه مرة ثانية".<br> قال الشيخ سعيد وهو يرمي في عواج الجوهر نفث من البخور: "سيعود إليك زوجك، ولن يزور مرة ثانية".<br> وكان صوته وقوياً هادئاً منجز عربية الطمانينة، فقدت عنها آهة ارتفاع طويلة، ابتهاج لها وجه الشيخ وقال: "ولكن عملي يطلب مالاً كثيراً <br> فاكتباب وجه عربية، وقالت وهي ترمق سواراً ذهبياً في مقصمها: "سادفع لك ما تريد".

ضحكة الشيخ ضحكة قصرة حادة ثم قال: "ستخسرين قليلاً ولكن ستريحن زوجك. أعتني به؟". غمسفت عربية بسحكت: "لا أحبه".

- اختلنت معي؟

- تشاجرتك مع أهله؟

- هل تشعرين بضيق في صدرك؟

- أشعر أحياناً كان حرجاً تقبلأ على صدري.

- أنشاهدين أحلاماً مزعجة أثناء نومك؟

- أستيقظت دائماً في الليل وأنا مزعوبة.

فهَّر الشيخ سعيد رأسه عدة مرات وقال: "لا بد أن أهل زوجك قد سحرواكم".

ارتاعت عربية وهتفت: "ما العمل؟!".
"To end their magic spell would require ten pounds' worth of incense."

Aziza was silent for a moment. She raised her hand to her chest, and took out ten pounds from her dress. She handed the money to Sheikh Said, and said: "That's all I have."

Sheikh Said got up and closed the black curtains in front of the two windows overlooking the narrow winding alley. Then he came back and sat in front of the copper dish in which the embers were glowing over smooth white ashes. He threw in some more incense, and said:

"My brothers, the jinn, hate the light and love darkness because their houses are underground."

Outside, the day was like a white-skinned woman. The sun's yellow rays burned down on the streets and fused with the murmur of the crowds. Sheikh Said's room, however, was dark and quiet.

"My brothers, the jinn, are kind. You'll be lucky if you gain their love. They love beautiful women. Remove your wrap."

Aziza took off her black wrap, revealing her buxom body, enveloped in a tight dress, to Sheikh Said. The Sheikh started to read from a book with yellow-stained pages in a low, mysterious voice. After a while, he said: "Come closer ... Lie down here."

Aziza lay down near the incense dish. Sheikh Said put his hand on her forehead while he continued reciting strange words. Suddenly, he said to Aziza: "Close your eyes. My brothers the jinn will arrive shortly."

Aziza closed her eyes and the Sheikh's voice rose, in a harsh commanding tone: "Forget everything."

The Sheikh's hand touched her smooth face. She remembered her father. The Sheikh's hand was rough, and had a strange smell. It was a big hand, no doubt with many wrinkles. His voice, too, was strange; it rose gradually in the quiet room with its dust-coloured walls.

The Sheikh's hand reached Aziza's neck. She remembered...
her husband's hand; it was soft and tender, like a woman's. He worked as a clerk in a grocery shop owned by his father. He never once attempted to caress her neck with tenderness; instead, his clawing fingers would grope the flesh of her thighs.

The Sheikh placed both his hands on her. His hands gently ran across her full breasts, and then moved down along the rest of her body, only to return once more to her bosom. This time, however, they were less gentle and began to squeeze her breasts ferociously. Aziza moaned. With difficulty, she opened her eyes, gazing at the wisps of smoke spreading through the room.

Sheikh Said took his hands away from Aziza. He continued his reading, added some incense on the burning embers in the dish, and said: "My brothers the jinn are coming ... They're coming."

A sharp jolt spread through Aziza's body, and she closed her eyes. With a voice that seemed to come from the other side of the world, Sheikh Said intoned:

"My brothers, the jinn, love beautiful women. You're beautiful, and they'll love you. I want them to see you naked when they come. They'll take away all the magic spells."

Panic-stricken, Aziza whispered: "No ... no ..."

The sheikh replied sternly: "They will hurt you if they don't love you."

Aziza remembered a man she once saw in the street. He was screaming like a wounded animal before collapsing, white foam forming on his mouth, kicking with his hands and legs as if he was drowning.

"No ... no ... no."

"They're coming."

The smell of incense grew much stronger. Aziza started to breathe loudly. Sheikh Said shouted: "Come, blessed ones, come!"

Aziza heard faint, joyful laughs and words she could not understand. She sensed the presence in the room of a large

...
number of dwarf-like creatures. She could not open her eyes in spite of repeated attempts to do so. She felt the creatures' hot breath on her face. One of them grabbed hold of her lower lip, and greedily squeezed it.

The carpet felt rough under her naked back. The incense fumes gathered and turned into a man who held her in his arms and anaesthetized her with his kisses. A wild fire erupted in her blood as the mouth left her lips and moved to the rest of her body. Aziza was panting, too afraid to move. Then her fear subsided, and she slowly began to experience a novel sense of ecstasy.

She smiled as she looked at white stars, a dark-blue sky, yellow plains and a fiery red sun. She heard the murmur of a river in the distance. However, the river would not remain remote. She laughed with joy. Sadness was a child that was running away from her. Now she was an adolescent. The neighbours' son kissed and embraced her. No ... No ... This was shameful. Like when the baker's assistant gave her some bread while she was standing at the door of her house; then, suddenly, his hand shot out and pinched the nipple of her small breast. She was hurt, angry and confused. Where is his hand? Ah, here it is. His hand once again touched her body. On her wedding night she screamed in pain, but now she does not scream. She saw her mother holding up a handkerchief, soaked with blood, while her relatives looked on, curiously. Her mother was shouting, her face beaming with joy: "My girl is the most honourable! Let our enemies die of envy!"

Aziza returned to the dry, yellow fields. The clouds were high in the sky. The heat of the sun was close to her. She twisted and turned, flushed, her body burned by a fierce heat. The sun was a fire closing in on her, sneaking into her blood. Aziza resisted peaking. At that moment, the rain poured down, and her entire body shuddered.

After a short while, Sheikh Said moved away from Aziza's naked body and headed towards the window. He drew back the curtains. Daylight flooded the room, setting Aziza's white flesh aglow.
Aziza was restless, and opened her eyes slowly and carefully, surprised at the brightness of the sunlight. She got up, feeling frightened. Sheikh Said said: “Don’t worry. My brothers, the jinn, have left.”

Aziza bent down, weary and ashamed. She picked up a piece of her clothing. She wished she could have lain there for a long time, motionless, eyes closed.

Sheikh Said wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and said to her: “Don’t be afraid ... They’ve left.”

Tears ran down her cheeks. At that moment, she heard the cry of a hawker in the alley. It sounded to her like the weeping of a desperate man who would not die. A few minutes later, Aziza was walking alone in the narrow twisting alley. She raised her head expectantly, but there was no passing bird. The sky was blue and empty.
Language Notes

1. جَزيرة: this is an old-fashioned, traditional name that derives from the male name خَرث, which is also an adjective meaning “precious” or “dear”. It is worth pointing out that many Arabic and Muslim names have adjectival meanings and most of them are used for both sexes, e.g. سمحة ("happy"), درجة ("sound"), حميلة ("beautiful"), وليمة ("rightly guided").

2. شيخ (pl. شُوْرخ), variously transcribed in English as Shaikh, Sheik, Shykh or Sheikh, the word initially meant “old man” (this meaning is also used in the Qur’an). Later on, the term became a title referring to a leader, noble or elder. It is also a term of address for an Islamic religious or legal scholar, while it is often extended to those purporting to have this expertise, as is the case in this story. Sheikh Sa’id in this story is not a genuine Islamic scholar, but someone who pretends to have the power and knowledge to undo magic spells.

3. إخوة: this is one of the plurals of أَخ ("brother"), the other one being إخوان. Note, however, that there is a difference in meaning; the latter plural is used in the sense of ‘brethren’, as in, for instance, الإخوان المسلمون, “The Muslim Brotherhood”.

4. جَنّ (coll. cf. جُنّي: جَني “Genie” (djinn, jinn) refers to ghosts or spirits created out of fire (cf. Qur. 15:26–7), which are frequently mentioned in the Qur’an (sura 72 is almost entirely devoted to them) as well as in many folk tales (not least of which in The Thousand and One Nights). Often said to be endowed with magical powers, the jinn of folklore can take on many shapes, while many people believe they are much like humans, capable of being good and bad. The jinn are part of popular beliefs mainly in North Africa and Egypt. The same root has also given us مَجَّنون, “mad” or “madman” (i.e. one possessed by a jinn).

5. ملأة: this is a large cloak or shawl often made of wool, wrapped around the top half of the body with one end tucked in under the arm and enveloping the body.

6. بخور: in some Arab countries incense is used to keep the evil eye away from the sick. In the United Arab Emirates, for instance, guests are usually provided with coffee and the smell of incense as soon as they arrive. In recent years there has been an increase in the varieties of incense aroma. They come in the shape of sticks or powder, or the raw ingredient is grated.

7. صُلبوقات فَرُوم: small ghostly creatures (here referring to jinn); فَرُوم (pl. فُرُوم): lit. “dwarf”.

8. مُنَدِّيَة مُبْتَلَأَ بِالدَّم: this is a reference to an old tradition, which is still alive in some areas (especially in the countryside). After the consummation of the marriage on the wedding night, a white sheet or cloth with the bride’s blood on it is paraded as a sign that she was a virgin, and thus an honourable girl from an honourable family.
Muḥammad al-Zafzāf

Born in 1942 in Sūq al-Arba’a al-Gharb (Souk Larbaa El Gharb), near Qunaitra in Morocco, Muḥammad al-Zafzāf studied philosophy at the University of Rabat (Mohammed V) before becoming a secondary-school teacher in Casablanca, which would remain his home until his death in 2001 after a long-suffering illness.

Considered the master of the Moroccan short story, al-Zafzāf is held in the greatest esteem all over the Arab world. He produced an impressive body of work, including many novels as well as plays and criticism. His short story collections include حوار في ليل متأخر (Late-night Dialogue, 1970), عَجْر في الغابة (Gypsy in the Forest, 1982) and مِلكُ السَّجرة المقدسة (The Sacred Tree, 1980) and مِلكُ الجن (King of the Jinn, 1984; Spanish trans. 2002). Interestingly, in the West al-Zafzāf is mainly known as a novelist thanks to translations into French and Spanish of some of his novels, such as النَّعلَة الَّذِي يُظْهرُ (The Woman and the Rose, Spanish trans. 1997) and الطَّغَبُ الَّذِي يَخْبَثُ (The Cock’s Egg) and الطَّغَبُ الَّذِي يَخْبَثُ (The Fox Who Appears and Disappears, French trans. 2004). The French translation of الطَّغَبُ الَّذِي يَخْبَثُ, L’œuf du Coq, received the prestigious Grand Atlas Prize in 1998.

Like others in his generation (such as Muḥammad Shukri), al-Zafzāf gave a voice to ordinary Moroccans, especially those living on the margins of society. His is a literature of social realism, arguing the cause of those who cannot express themselves, often doing so in the local vernacular. The story presented here, The Sacred Tree (taken from the homonymous collection), provides a good example of both the type of prose and subject matter tackled by al-Zafzāf. The language is Standard Arabic, yet clearly Moroccan (or North African) in the way it is used, with a number of peculiarly Moroccan usages. This fits in well with the subject, which, despite certain universal features, is quintessentially Morrocan and reveals a great many things about that country’s contemporary society. At the same time, al-Zafzāf is not a “political” author, as such; this is no pamphlet or treatise dressed up as a work of fiction. Rather, it is fiction with a social conscience, drawn from real-life events; the realism is palpable and the narrative enthralling, with tragedy often commingled with comedy.
The Sacred Tree

Some youngsters who had enjoyed some education simply smiled with derision and contempt. What did it matter to them if they cut down a tree in an abandoned place? What did it matter to them, even if it was a towering tree that was in a garden and heavy with delicious fruit that fell because it was ripe or rotten, or remained hanging from the branches?

They were stretching themselves, craning their necks, the better to look at the crowd milling around. They did not pay any attention to the work that was going on in the middle of this clearing where there was nothing but a tree. Behind it, there were panels of reinforced concrete that were being carefully and slowly erected. Behind the high-rise panels, there were darkly coloured buildings in which the window frames had not yet been fitted, the giant gaps redolent of the gaping maws of mythical animals. A cordon of auxiliary security forces formed a tight circle, preventing anybody from approaching the clearing where the tree stood on a brown sandy hillock.

A crowd gathered behind the hedge made up of the auxiliary troops, who responded violently, flailing their batons at shoulders and knees. One could hear the laments — perhaps it was a child being trampled underfoot, desperately clinging to its mother, barefoot and covered in rags. Behind, some youngsters with a modicum of education continued to crane their necks.

One of them said to his neighbour:

"That’s what the state does best."

"What’s it to you what the state does? What do you care if they cut a tree? The day after tomorrow they’ll build a modern building, and that won’t have anything to do with you either! The money for the rent won’t go into your pocket!"

"Fair enough, but this magical nonsense should be rooted out. They continue to worship this tree."
“They’ll worship it even more once it’s been cut down!”
“Quite the contrary, they’ll forget all about it.”

The crowd around the clearing continued to grow, with plenty of jostling forwards and backwards. Some rifles and thick-ended batons were raised into the air and then swooped down hard on arms and bodies. A woman pulled back her snotty-nosed child and said to another woman, who completely ignored her:
“What’s that tree got to do with us? This government wants the curse of Sidi Daud to descend upon it. Believe you me, not one of them will be able to sleep tonight without something bad happening to them.”

“What does the government care?” said the second woman, without even turning around.

“It’s the poor devils that are cutting the tree that’ll be hit by the curse. The makhzen keeps well clear of it. They’re always making people dig their own graves, while they make sure they’re out of harm’s way.”

The woman realized that it was dangerous to talk like that, and she started to tremble with fear, anxiously looking around. She was scared that one of the makhzen agents might be behind her and would take her down to the police station, where she would be flogged and hung like a sheep from a butcher’s hook in one of the cells. She thought about the three children she had to feed after her husband had passed away.

She continued talking to the woman next to her: “The government know what they’re doing. They wouldn’t cut the tree if there wasn’t a good reason.”

The other woman asked: “So, you’re not afraid of the curse of Sidi Daud? Shut your mouth or he’ll come to you when you’re asleep tonight!”

“And what am I supposed to have done to Sidi Daud? I’m just a poor widow, trying to make ends meet and care for my children as best I can!”

The woman left the crowd. She didn’t want any problems...
either with the police or with Sidi Daud. What’s more, she did not even know Sidi Daud. She had never seen him, and his grave was not in the clearing. People said he had planted the tree where his soul had migrated. It was also said that nobody had planted this tree, but that it had just appeared one day in the clearing, as though it had been there for years. She had only appealed for his help once, when her husband had been on his deathbed for more than two years. However, a few days after visiting the tree, Sidi Larbi – or Sidi Daud – had taken her husband’s soul.

The sun seared the bodies in the crowd, while the people had become unrecognizable because of the dust and debris flying around. All that could be seen were the drops of sweat glistening on their noses. The noise of the bulldozer in the clearing continued unabated. A few of the workmen were whiling away the time by playing with the ropes attached to the tree trunk. Behind them, the rifles were still trained on the crowd. A government order must be enforced to the letter. Then, the trunk and branches could be heard to crack, and the tree fell to the ground. Some of the workmen let go of the ropes and ran off. Behind them, the policemen also beat a hasty retreat. None of them felt like having their eyes poked out by a falling branch. The security cordon began to disintegrate, and once again rifle butts and batons were raised. Crooked arms were flailing about in empty space. Voices of protest rose, both muffled and loud. One of the onlookers said:

“Tomorrow or the day after, a building will be constructed on the resting place of Sidi Daud’s soul.”

“I’m afraid that these people will call it ‘Sidi Daud’s Building’, and that they’ll hang candles and amulets along its walls.”

“Anything is possible.”

The jostling around the clearing increased. People had left their small, pokey shops, rushing to see what was going on. Others preferred to observe the scene from a distance. Two cars drew to a halt in front of the crowd. The police chief got out
الحرس، يقصده الناس أول الأمر بذهول عندما رأوه.
اخذ بعضهم يشتمه بصوت مخفض. الحرس يضربون في كل أنحاء المدينة.
تنتظر الغبار حول الموكب الصغير من كل الجهات. القائد وجد فوضى لا هلمه، خصوصاً في أمور ذات حساسية مثل هذا. الغبار ينتابه، والصراخ والعصي وأعقاب البندقية تنتابه كل ذلك في ضراً في لحظة مثل هذه. ما على أكبر رئيس دولة في العالم إلا أن يتحمل أعبائه.
ما على أكبر رئيس حكومة، أكبر وزير، أكبر وال، أكبر عمدة، أكبر قائد مقاطعة، أكبر فنان إلا أن يتحمل أعبائه. لكن الذين يتلقون الأوامر لا يتحملون نفسيهم. يعتقدون أحياناً أن أي تصرف فرد ياري منهم، هو تلبية لأمر سام. إن أي رئيس دولة في العالم يمكنه أن يتقبل صعقة ويستلمين كاميرا التلفزيون. سوف يقهر الناس لأنه لم يفعل مثلهم لأنه يليه! لكيه في الحق، يستطيع أن يبتكر الأموار لتهديد عشائر المدن. لأن كاميرا التلفزيون ليست موجهاً إليه في تلك اللحظة. بعد ذلك سوف يخطب في الناس مظهراً براعة الإنسان تجاه أخي الإنسان.:
الأجرع الآن ترتفع، والأصوات ترتفع، وأعقاب البندقية تترشق في السماء، تصمد بروس العصي أحياناً، وبروس البشر أحياناً أخرى. تصرخ الأفواه وتتنزّر الوجه دماً، وتسقط الأجسام أربعاً. لكن القائد دائماً لا يتحرك. إنه يحاول أن يعود نفسه على أن يصبح وزيراً، أمام كاميرا التلفزيون. (أثبت. سوف تأتي لحظة الانقلام، وفي حينها، عندما نستطيع أن نتدخل عشائر المدن.)

أعقاب بعض البندقية تناوبه، عن غير قصد، في حلف لشكر الجماهير، التي

of one of them, preceded by a few of his men, who set about clearing a path for him. At first, the people were shocked to see him. Some began to curse him under their breath, while the policemen lashed out in every direction.

The party was surrounded by a cloud of dust. Only the police chief knew how important it was to appear cool and indifferent. The slightest movement could trigger no end of unrest and chaos, especially in matters as sensitive as this one. Dust flew up. Then, there were cries, and the fleeting movement of batons and rifle butts. All this was necessary at such a time. The greatest ruler in the world only has to do one thing – to keep his nerves under control. The greatest head of government, minister, police chief, or whatever, all of them have to make sure of only one thing, namely to keep themselves under control.

However, those who receive orders do not control themselves. Sometimes they, of their own accord, think they are enforcing an order that has come down to them. Any head of state is capable of receiving a slap in the face and still continue smiling in front of television cameras. People will admire him precisely because he did not react the way they would have done – indeed as they do for the slightest thing. However, when the camera lights are not trained on him, that very same leader can just as easily give the order to destroy tens of cities. Afterwards, he will hold grand speeches, cloaking himself in the innocence of one who respects his fellow man.

Arms and voices rose, rifle butts pierced the sky, sometimes hitting a baton or a skull. There were screams, faces oozing with blood, bodies collapsing to the ground. The police chief never made the slightest movement; he tried to prepare himself for when he would become a minister, standing in front of a television camera. (Stand firm! The hour of vengeance is near, and you will be able to destroy tens of cities.)

Some of the rifle butts inadvertently brushed against him because of the thickness of the crowd, those people who
worshipped this tree. Yet, he did not flinch. He retained his stern smile, despite the dust that coated his face and a large part of the throng. However, one of those receiving orders had lost his self-control. Thrown from God knows where, a large stone landed on the police chief’s head, fracturing his skull. He sank to the ground, his smile still fixed on his lips, lying in a pool of blood and soil. The troops opened fire. Stones were flying through the air, heavy with dust. Shots rang out, though no one knew where they were coming from. Bodies fell. Others fled, scattering in every direction, pushing and shoving one another. A cloud of dust rose up. It was a fully-fledged battle, total chaos.

Feelings of anger, fear, hatred, courage and cowardice enveloped the tree that lay lifeless on the ground. Bullets were flying everywhere, ripping everything in their path. Everything became blurred: the laments, the weeping and dying screams. The police chief’s lips still had a smile on them, despite the blood and soil, as though tens of cameras were crowded around him in order to get a shot of him.

The people began to disperse. The narrow streets became empty as the doors and windows dotted along the haphazardly built walls were shut. Eyes appeared through the chinks and crannies in the walls, windows and doors. However, these eyes did not see anything except the troops, spread out across the clearing or posted at the entrance of the maze of squalid alleyways in which the sewage and garbage had amassed.

Some shopkeepers, greengrocers, spice merchants and other small traders left their goods in order to take shelter wherever they could. A few old women who sold henna, herbs, locally produced soap and various magic paraphernalia such as rats’ tails, and crows’ heads, scattered in every direction, abandoning their wares on the pavement. The policemen approached their chief, who signalled to them to take him to one of the cars. One of the policemen was struck by the chief’s extraordinary strength of character when he saw him lying there, still smiling as though nothing had happened.
Language Notes

1. أُغْصَانُ: sg. فُوزُع (فُوزَع) = غَصَّانَ عَلَى أَعْصَانَ (أَعْصَانَ).

2. كَرِاء مَال: MCA “rent (money)” (أَكْرَى), “to rent out” (أَكْرَى), “to rent”, “hire”). In MSA, the usual term is أَيْجَارُ, “to rent out”, “let” (أَيْجَارُ, “to rent”, “hire”).


4. ما لنا ومال الشجرة: dialectal phrasing common in a large number of dialects (e.g. Egyptian and Iraqi as well as Moroccan). It is important to note that مال here does not refer to “money” or “wealth”; rather, it is a particle used to denote possession. MSA: ما لنا وللمشجرة.

5. سيد: strictly speaking سيدi (“Mister”, “Sir”), the form here is pronounced sid and is used in North Africa for people enjoying a high social or religious status. It is also the usual epithet for saints, as is the case here: سيدي داود.

It is sometimes abbreviated to سيد: e.g. سيدي محمد.

6. مخزن: lit. meaning “storehouse” (خَزَّان), u, “to store”), the word is used here in the peculiarly Moroccan sense of “the authorities” (formerly only the Treasury, i.e. “the place where the money is stored”).

7. مخزن: مَكْرِزَة man” (see above), i.e. “government official”.

8. المقاطعة: MCA “district office”. In MSA this word denotes “district”.

9. تَمْعَضُ: “to transmigrate (the spirit)”; cf. تَمْعَضُ (الرُوح), “metempsychosis”. Note that تَمْعَضُ شَخْصَية فِلاَن means “to pretend to be someone else”, “to take over someone else’s personality”.

10. يزك ب: “to seek a blessing (بِرَكَة) from a saint.

11. سراً سراً: “secretly”.

12. كَامِرا: sg. تَكَامِرُ: MCA; MSA تَكَامِرُ (“are thrown”).

of the homegrown coinings or آلة التصوير (انسدأح) (“insignificant”).

14. مَخْزُون: superlative of تَمْعَضُ (الرُوح).
Ibrahim al-Faqih

Ahmad Ibrahim al-Faqih was born in 1932 into a middle-class family in Mizd, a small village in the famous macadam hills of the hamada al-hajar (Hamada Hamra), about 100 miles south of the Libyan capital Tripoli. After completing his secondary education in Libya, he went to Egypt in 1962 to study journalism. When he returned to Libya, al-Faqih worked briefly as a journalist before moving to London to study theatre. Resettling in Libya in 1972, he became head of the country’s National Institute for Music and Drama. In the 1980s, during his stay in Britain as a diplomat attached to the Libyan embassy, he completed a PhD at the University of Edinburgh.

Together with Ibrahim al-Kawni (al-Koni)—a fellow member of the so-called “Sixties Generation”—al-Faqih is undoubtedly one of the most famous and influential Libyan authors of the present day. He has published the following collections of short stories: ارتطموا أحزمة (The Empty Sea, 1966); اختفت النجوم فَأَيْنَ أَنتَ؟ (Fasten Your Seatbelts, 1968); امرأة من ضوء (The Stars Disappeared, and Where Were You?, 1985); خمسة خانقين تخبَّط اللمحة (Five Beetles Are Ruling the Tree, 1998); and مرآيا فينيسية (Reflections of Venice). In addition, al-Faqih has also been prolific as a journalist and critic, playwright and novelist. Several of his works have been translated into English, including غزارات (Gazelles, and Other Plays, 1999), حَدْوَل من الرماد (Valley of Ashes, novel, 1999); and مَنْ يَخاف أَخْتَا كرِيستي (Who’s Afraid of Agatha Christie?, novel, 1999). Al-Faqih also edited a volume of translated short stories written by Libyan authors that had originally appeared in the London-based magazine Azure under the title Libyan Short Stories (1999).

Probably his most ambitious project to date is the prize-winning trilogy (translated as Gardens of the Night, 1995), consisting of سأُهِبُك مَدِينة أَخْرَى (I Shall Offer Another City); نفق هذه تُحَوِّل مَلْكَيْيْ (These Are the Borders of My Kingdom); and تضييئية أمَرأة واحدة (A Tunnel Lit by a Woman). Like the Egyptian Yahya Haqqi’s or the Sudanese al-Tayyib Salih’s or the Season of Migration to the North, 1969), al-Faqih’s trilogy highlights the alienation of Western-educated Arab—in this case, Libyan—intellectuals, on the cusp between the Western temptations to which they at some point give in and the realization that salvation can only come from within.

The present story, extracted from اخفت النجوم فَأَيْنَ أَنتَ؟, is to some extent also preoccupied with alienation, albeit not in the traditional sense inasmuch as it depicts the protagonist’s inability to deal with changes in tradition for reasons rooted within himself rather than being based on experiences outside his native society. The result, however, is no less dramatic and tragic, and at times even comic, all of which is powerfully conveyed by al-Faqih’s tight, polished prose style, which, as the story develops, is increasingly at odds with the protagonist’s mental disarray.
At first he thought that they had all, for some reason, decided to play truant that morning. On his way to class, the teacher, Mr Abd al-Hafiz, had walked past the teachers’ room. He, too, had got into the routine of taking roll call. He continued his journey to the classroom through the long hallway, the walls of which were covered with notices and students’ drawings.

When he saw that the door at the end of the hallway was closed, without a sound emanating from inside the room or any of the usual racket that could be heard every morning, he knew that the little devils had invented some excuse for not turning up for class that day. It also meant that he had to return to the school office to have it out with them about this recurrent absenteeism. He swore that he would record any student’s unauthorized absence, whatever their excuse or reason.

As if to remove all doubt he opened the door, and without so much as glancing inside he closed it again. He considered going back to the school office, were it not for the faint whisper he had heard when opening the door. He looked inside again and, much to his surprise, he discovered that they were all there. They were sitting properly in their seats, quietly opening their copybooks and silently studying or writing. They behaved as though they had suddenly transformed into grown men.

Abd al-Hafiz entered the classroom, completely dumbstruck. He immediately started looking around to see whether the ‘fat cat’ from the Ministry was lurking somewhere. Indeed, the only possible explanation for this eerie calm that pervaded the class was that one of the ministerial inspectors had arrived before him to conduct an inspection round in order to embarrass him in front of the students and record that he had arrived late for

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صفحة من
كتاب الموتى

ظٍّنَّ للهوتلة الأولى، أنهم جمعاً، ولأمر ما، قد يغيروا عن الحضور إلى المدرسة، هذا الصباح. كان الأساتذة عبد الخفيف قد مر في طريقه إلى الفصل بحجة المدرسين، وأخذ كله الروتيني سجل الحضور. وسار يقطع ممر الطابق ملأه جدرانه الصحف الخائطة ورسوم التلاميذ، إلى حجرة المدرسة.

وعندما رأى الباب في نهاية الممر مغلقاً، ولم يسمع للطلبة صوتاً، ولم ينتاب إليه ضجيجهم وعواكهم كما هي العادة كل صباح، أدرك أن هؤلاء الشياطين قد تدبروا عذراً للهروب من الدروس هذا اليوم. وأن عليه أن يعود إلى الإدارة ويسألها بجرم أن تجد هذا الغياب المتكدر، وأقسم بينه وبين نفسه أن يسجله عليهم غياباً غير مشروع، كما يعد المعلم أو السبب.

ولجدهم قطع الشك بالبيتين فتح الباب، ودون أن يهتم بإيقاف نظرة إلى الداخل أعاد فقه، وهم بالرجل معه لا أن تثبت THEY أطلع عليه عند فتح الباب همهمة ضعيفة، فأعاد فتحه من جديد واكتشف لدشته الكبيرة أنهم جمعياً هناك، يجلسون في أدب إلى مقاعدهم ويفتحون في هدوء كاهليهم، ويتكون في صمت على المطالعة أو الكتابة، ويصرعون كأنهم تحولوا فجأة إلى رجال كبار.

دخل الأساتذة عبد الخفيف وقد عقدت لسانه الدهشة إلى الفصل، فتش في أول ما فتح عن (القط الذي جاء من الوزارة)، فليس هناك من تسرب لها الهدوء العجيب الذي يعم الفصل إلا أن مفتاحاً من مفتشي الوزارة قد سبقه إلى هنا، اختار هذا الوقت المثير لجولته التنفيذية كي يعبده أمام الطلاب ويسجل عليه مرة أنه جاء إلى الدائرة متأخرًا، نظر إلى ساعته وأطمأن إلى أن...
class. But then Abd al-Hafiz looked at the clock, and was fully reassured that he was on time, no doubt about it. He would defiantly raise his head to this inspector, whom he imagined standing next the blackboard. However, there was nobody there. What kind of prank was this? He knew about the cat-and-mouse game these inspectors were so proficient at, and inflicted upon him.

He walked around the blackboard and the desk, in case the inspector was hiding behind one of them, but there was no cat or mouse. He stopped for a minute, baffled and at a loss to explain what was going on. His gaze wandered around the room in search of something out of the ordinary, but everything was the way it should be: each boy was sitting at the desk which had been allocated to him at the beginning of the year; the window was still the same; the mulberry tree behind it, which had recently sprouted leaves, still stood proud and tall; the drawings on the wall were the same feeble and primitive scribbings that had always been there; the blackboard had not moved an inch from its place. This was definitely his classroom and these were definitely his students, with their usual faded, grimy features. He had not taken the wrong route into work, nor had he entered a school on another planet, in another country or city. Everything inside the classroom was as it should be, except, that is, for this eerie calm, which he had never witnessed in any classroom for as long as he had been a teacher.

His attention was drawn to a previously empty seat at the back of the class which was now occupied by one of the students whom he was used to seeing in front of him, at the first desk on the left. He was about to ask him for the secret behind this change when his attention was drawn to the student’s former seat, where he suddenly discovered a demon – God help us! – sitting quietly. There was no doubt that this was a demon who had taken on the guise of a girl, and was sitting in this seat, close to him, impudently and shamelessly. It was against all the laws of nature!

معاد حضوره في النمطم والكمال، ورفع رأسه في تذكّر بواجه ذلك المنتظر الذي تصور أنه يقف الأناشيد الأسطورة. لم يكن هناك أحد، ما هذا الهزار، الفيل؟ إنه يعرف لعب القطة وال فأر التي يتمثل هؤلاء المخلوقين في لعبها معه.

طارف بالStories ومنضدة عساك يحتفظ خلف إحدامها، لم يجد قطا ولا فأرًاءً فله ذيقة محتتماً، عاجزاً عن تفسير ما حدث، أجاب بصبره داخل الحجرة عليه يعد شيئاً غريباً قد حدث، كان كل شيء كما هو، كل واحد يجلس إلى مكانه الذي تعود أن يجلس إليه منذ بداية العام، النافذة هي النافذة ومن خلفها شجرة التوت التي استمر حديثاً بالورق تقطع في زهو وكرياء، والرسوم على الحائط هي نفس الرسوم بدائية وركية، تعود أن يراها دائماً، والStories لم تتحرك قيد أغلام عن مكانها والفصل هو فصل، والتلاميذ هم تلاميذ، بسحتهم التربية الباهرة، فهو لم يخطئ الطريق ولم يدخل خطأ إلى مدرسة في كوك آخر، أو وطن آخر، أو مدينة أخرى غير مدينة، كان كل شيء في داخل الفصل عادياً وطبيعياً، ما عدا هذا الهواء الغريب الذي لم يرته طيلة عمر أمضاه في التدريس يحدث في فصل من الفصول الدراسية.

استمر أندباه أن مقعداً مهجوراً في آخر الفصل جلس إليه الآن واحد من الطلبة من تعود أن يراهم أمامه في أول مقعد على الشمال، فهم بأن يسألهم عن سر هذا الغريب لو أن حانتهم النافذة إلى مكانه السابق، فإذا يكون قفزة، وفعلاً يجلس في عدم إلى ذلك المقصد، تعود بالله من الشيطان الرجيم، إنه دوماً شغف أفراد، تتبك في صفة بنت من الباطن وجاء في صفقة وقفة أدب وذوق مختلفاً كل النوميس في الدنيا، ليجلس إلى ذلك المقصد قريباً منه.
He looked at her with consternation as she sat among his male students as if she was one of them, as if she had known them, and they her, for ages; as if this was a perfectly normal and natural thing to do; as if there was nothing wrong with the fact that a girl was present in a school for boys and in a class devoted to the teaching of boys. He continued to stare at her, both in terror and astonishment, as though he had seen a corpse in his class.

How could Mr Abd al-Hafiz bear a sight of this kind? After all, this was not a girls’ school, but a boys’ school, where all the teachers and students were male! How could this girl have ended up here, and what right did she have to come here and sit down, in front of him, on this morning? He was never going to allow any creature to catch him unawares like this. He had got up that morning, done his prayers, had breakfast, shaved, corrected his students’ assignments, put on his coat and come to school without even the slightest inkling that there would be a demon in the shape of a girl brazenly sitting in front of him. He could never have imagined that this was going to happen to him!

He had always imagined that girls had to study other things, that they were taught by female teachers and surrounded by girls in schools especially for them, which had big iron gates and high walls and were filled with mystery and secrecy.

He thought that what was taught to boys was for males only, and any female ought to be embarrassed and ashamed to hear it. He could never have imagined that any girl would depart from the principles of decency and modesty and sit down in class together with boys, with a total lack of shame and morals; to listen to the things the boys listened to, to write down what they wrote down and to be examined on the things they were examined on. As for this girl, she must surely be lost – either that, or she had slipped into the school through the window. She was clearly engaged in some plot against him, and he was not going to treat her like the...
من الطلاب كان من ذلك إثنان، أو جريمة يعاقبه عليها القانون، ويساق سببها إلى القضاء.

خشى أن يكون التهمة قد لاحظها ما أصابه من ذعر وارتباك، فتدبر نفسه وشد قامة، وعقد ما بين حاجبه، وخطاطها بلحظة رسمية حاول أن يجعلها خالية من أي أثر لما يتعلق في صدره من افتعالات.

- قيم.

وقف أبا لعلياء ً أرائزة قامتها في حجم قامته، صدرها نافر، وشعرها طويل أسود يغطي الكنف، أرائزة نضجت ثمارها وحان أن يزدهرها إلى بيت الزوجية لا الخروقات مع الأولاد الذين وصلوا حديثاً سن البلوغ في مدرسة ثانوية. إنّ في الأمر مكيدة.

- اسمك؟

وقبل أن تفتح شفتيها أسرع الولد الذي ترك لها مقعدة وجلس في آخر الفصل، متطوعاً للإجابة.

- اسمها زهرا ياسن.

أغاظه تطلف هذا الولد الذي اكتشف الآن فقط كيف أنه مسؤول القمة، وأنه قميص متسخ الثوب، وله أسنان متكاثلة صفراء، وأدرك أن كل ما كان يلقيه متأثراً فوق أرض الحجرة من أعقاب السجائر إذا دخنه هذا الولد. أعاد السؤال يحفظ ونفاذ صبر متجاهلًا ما قاله الولد.

- اسمك؟

- زهرا عبد السلام.

أحش في صوتي نبرة تحية واستعمال، أي عبد السلام هذا الذي يسمح لابن في سن الزواج أن تخرج من بيتها، وتأتي دون حيا، إلى مدرسة للأولاد جلس معهم وتختلط بهم، أي أب في الدنيا يسمح بذلك؟

فخش عن اسمها في سجل الحضور، كان اسمها هناك مكتوباً بالقلم، أضيف إضافة إلى القائمة التي كتب بالآلة الكاتبة، التبس عليه الأمر، إذن
This made the entire matter even more obscure to him. So the school management knew about this. There was no doubt that the girl was party to the scheme that was being plotted against him. Mr Abd al-Hafiz thought about all his enemies among the inspectors, who hated his frankness and time and again conspired against him, sometimes blocking his promotion. They were also behind his having been transferred to another school, and now they could not find anything to do to him except if they broke every law and decree in the land. They plotted against him by putting a girl in one of the classes that he was teaching; indeed, this trap could not have been set for anyone except him.

He had forgotten whether he had finished his preparation, just as he no longer knew whether he was supposed to teach Arabic or Religious Education that day. With a trembling hand, he picked up the chalk and went to the blackboard in order to write something down. He wrote down the date and then stopped, as if he realized for the very first time that it was the Seventies now, and that he had started working as a teacher twenty years earlier. Suddenly he felt weak and exhausted, and sat down again in his chair, feeling totally worn out. He noticed that the girl was still standing, and so he made a gesture with his hand, not knowing himself whether it meant that she should leave, sit down, disappear or die.

However, she quietly sat down, raised her small head and looked at him, defiantly. At that moment, he decided that he would hand in his resignation that day, without any hesitation or regret. He sat down without saying a word and buried his head in his hands, oblivious to the probing eyes that surrounded him. He thought about this heresy ... this deviation ... this abomination. He had lived his entire life in piety, complying with the boundaries laid down by God, believing that women are inviolable and must be protected, and that their place is in the home, far from the gaze of men. He knew that when a man...
and a woman are together, Satan is never far away. So, when a woman meets thirty men, or a thousand men, there must be devils everywhere, enough to fill the universe; a catastrophe will befall this world, while Judgment Day will be nigh.

Mr Abd al-Hafiz dictated a sentence the students had to parse, as he sat immersed in thought. As soon as he finished the lesson, he would go to the school management and hand in his notice. This was the last time they would try to make him resign. This was exactly what they wanted. They had put this girl in front of him in a desperate attempt to make him do it. But he would not resign. He was not going to allow them to win just like that. The wisest course of action for him was not to rise to the bait and remain a thorn in their side.

When he finished the lesson, Mr Abd al-Hafiz angrily went to see the head teacher. It was clear that he was going to feed him some story or other. As it turned out, the girl’s father was a government official who had recently been transferred to this remote part of the city, where there was no other secondary school except this one. Lest the girl be prevented from getting an education, the school had been obliged to accept her. The Ministry had agreed, and the girl was placed in the school. So, it was clearly a legal matter. However, he was not going to be deceived by this ruse, since he knew all the tricks of these youngsters who all of a sudden called the shots at the Ministry’s Centres for Educational Management and Orientation. He was going to fight them, by himself; he was going to show them the extent to which this entire business was crooked.

The next day, he decided to ignore the girl. There was no doubt that the best thing to do was to pretend to forget about her, to ignore her and to teach his class as though she was not there at all. Mr Abd al-Hafiz made up his mind that he would not direct any question to her, nor would he collect her copybook or refer to her presence or absence. He would disregard her and treat her with contempt until either she or whoever brought her here became ashamed, and she returned whence she had come, humiliated and defeated.
دخل إلى الفصل، دهشته أن يرى مرة أخرى هذا الهدوء العجيب الذي ظنه أمس حالة استثنائية، الحقيقة، الخضوع والعرق والرضم، الألاند كان من كوكب آخر، كوكب ليس فيه ما زالت ولا غابات ولا ضرما، ولا رمال. اختفت من فوق وجههم الأثرية قصوراً يتألقون كالصايح، اعتنا بهندامهم وصفيف شعرهم، وارتدوا ملابس نظيفة، أنقى، فقرهم صار فجأة غني، وبوهتهم القمية المتصلة بالأرض صارت فجأة صبر، وأمهاتهم القروية الجاهلات صرح فجأة سيدات علم وذوق وثقافة، بات تأملهم كان يراهم لأول مرة، روحًا جدًا لم يعرفها طالبة في التدريس تمر اليوم هذا الفصل، وعجباً لم يعده من قبل ينشر في الجو، ونحت إلى أن حضورهم كاملي للمرة الأولى، وعندما سأل عن الواجب وجد أنهم جميعًا وبدون استثناء قد كتبوا واجباتهم، ما الذي حدث في الكون وأي مفجعة هذه التي جات بهذا الانقلاب الحطبي؟

وعندما ضع الفصل، كان الأستاذ عبد الحفيظ شباً فشيئاً يكتشف التحول العجيب الذي أصاب هؤلاء الطلبة، إن أكثرهم تملاً وغباء وسرحتان أثناء الفصل، فجأة يشع حماسته بالإعجاب، فالخبرية هبت عليه الآن في هذه الساعة، والغراب أنها حقا كذلك، فها هي الإجابة تأتي على أستفساتهم سهلة بقولها بفصاحة وقدرة على التعبير لم يعدها في فصل من فصول الدراسة قبل الآن، بل إنه هو نفسه يحس الآن ولأول مرة بأهمية الدروس التي يقدمها، إنهم يتصون إليه وبابعون كلماته كأن ما يقول صار فجأة أخطر ما في الدنيا، وأن يجوزه كل أسرار الكون، حالة لم يعرفها طيلة العشرين عاماً في التدريس إلا هذا اليوم، ودون أن يدري وجد نفسه يستغرق النظر إليها، أي سطوة ملكها، أي قوة جهيمة جاءت تحملها...
world other than our own...

Once again he glanced over at her and noticed something which he had never noticed before. His eyes scanned over her features, searching for something, anything, that would explain what she was doing. He saw in her eyes, something he had never seen before, a look of determination, a look that spoke of purpose.

She stood there, her back straight, her face set in determined lines. Her eyes were focused on him, on the situation at hand. He could see the sweat on her brow, the strain in her muscles, and he knew that she was capable of great things. If she was capable of anything, it was to fight for what she believed in.

He reached out a hand, offering her his support. She took it, gripping it tightly in her own determination. Together, they would face whatever challenge came their way.
Suddenly, all his suspicions were confirmed when he glanced at the bottom of her chair and saw that her feet were like donkey’s hooves. He nearly uttered a shriek loud enough to shatter all the walls of the school, but then he realized that it was simply the heels of her shoes. He was afraid she could now read his thoughts, become angry with him and decide to use her tricks to transform him on the spot into a pillar, a tree, a frog or a meowing cat. The thought of this danger sent shivers throughout his body – God protect us from Satan! Then, he closed the religion book and left the class before the lesson had ended.

When he got home, Mr Abd al-Hafiz was still shaking. He felt an overwhelming fear, as though he had committed some crime, and some terrifying punishment would inevitably befall him. He imagined her following him everywhere with her donkey’s hooves. Sometimes she would be sporting two scary wings like those of a bat, or she would be a dragon, fearsome flames spewing forth from its mouth. Other times, he imagined her with claws like those of a mythical animal, or she would appear to him as Satan, chasing him wherever he went. He had to force himself more than once not to repeat her name in a loud voice, out of sheer fear and terror.

After his morning prayers he discovered one of her notebooks. He had forgotten his promise not to take it together with the other students’ copybooks. He sat down, turning it over with trembling fingers. However, contrary to what he thought, there was nothing strange or bizarre about the copybook; it did not contain any magical words or riddles such as those found in the Book of the Dead. Everything was normal, just as in all the other copybooks, except that her handwriting was better and more beautiful. He made up his mind; with the obstinacy of a child, he grabbed hold of his pen and gave her a low mark despite the fact that all her answers were correct. He would engage her in battle. He would not flinch before the oppressive kings that served her.
In class he awaited her reaction, expecting to be turned into a mouse, cat or frog. He would neither yield nor scold, as the question was one of principle and dignity, life or death. He saw that she was distressed as she compared her copybook with her neighbour’s. She was about to say something when he peevishly silenced her so she would cry, commit suicide or throw herself out of the window. He would not be fooled by her wiliness and cunning; he would fight this black magic that she had brought with her until his dying breath. Lesson after lesson went by, and he continued to provoke her, taking every opportunity to rebuke her; despite her zeal, he consistently gave her the lowest mark.

As for her, it was as though she was not party to the fight; she sat calmly in her chair, while her warm fragrance spread throughout the classroom. She took a strange interest in her lessons, as if the entire thing did not concern her. There was no doubt that this calm was entirely feigned, and this composure artificial; no doubt she was preparing something dreadful for him. Every day he imagined that this dreadful thing would take place; he would find the school turned into a pile of ashes or the students transmogirified into monkeys. He imagined waking up one day and finding that he had become a rabbit, a hedgehog or a pig. One day after another passed as he awaited the catastrophe that lay in store for him – an earthquake or the arrival of Judgment Day. But neither the earthquake nor Judgment Day came. If something was going to happen, it would no doubt become clear to him very soon.

When one day he entered the classroom and did not find her there, he felt as though the thing on which he had built his life had suddenly collapsed. The magic that had filled the classroom had vanished, as had the perfume. He was once again faced with the boys’ ugliness, poverty and stupidity as they all reverted to their previous despicable state. The classroom had become darker and gloomier; the sun that had risen along the ceiling of the room was extinguished that day.
He always imagined that the girl's disappearance from school would constitute a victory for him, and fill his heart with joy and pride. He felt that he had lived on the edge of his nerves these past days; he had fought her magic to get this result. However, this was not a sweet victory. Instead, he felt that a strange sense of grief had gripped his heart, while his throat was as dry as tinder. He felt he had lost something very precious that had filled his heart every morning – a driving force and a challenge. For the first time, he began to reflect on the entire episode, and was left with a feeling of remorse. Spiders were weaving their webs inside his chest. He had been mean in his treatment of her. He had been unfair to imagine her as Satan, a demon or a dragon, when in fact she was only a small, innocent child. If he had married young, he could have had a daughter her age. He stared into the classroom, which looked as deserted as a ruin, inhabited by the diabolical boys. He seriously thought of going to look for her to ask for her forgiveness. He would talk to her father, humbly requesting the latter to send his daughter back to school, where he would treat her like a princess or a queen. He resolved to do this at the earliest opportunity; but then the next day she was back, and returned the students' wealth and handsomeness to them as her warm perfume once again wafted through the classroom.

The sun once more shone in class, and Mr Abd al-Hafiz noticed with joy that a flock of sparrows now rested in his heart. The tree stretched its branches and blossomed inside his chest. For the first time, teaching was the most beautiful profession in the world. It was no longer a heavy chore to come to class; rather, it was a feast that was repeated each day. The girl was no rebel, foreigner or dragon; she was a pretty little girl, who radiated, and to whom he showed love and affection. He was generous in his marks for her. He would grow worried if she was only one minute late. He missed her from the moment he left the classroom until he returned the next day.

Ibrahim al-Faqih
Throughout all this, Mr Abd al-Hafiz did not realize that he was increasingly paying attention to his appearance. He started wearing the suit he used to save for Eid, every day. He started to shave every morning and put cologne on, whereas previously he would forget to shave once or twice a week. For the first time, he reflected on his past life. He realized that he had prematurely entered a phase in his life, believing, wrongfully, that he was nearing the age of retirement when in reality he was only forty-five or forty-six. Despite the fact that he had a wife, whose body had withered, and children who milled about like ants inside the house, he was still in the prime of life. Most of life’s goodness and sweetness still lay ahead of him. He would be unjust to himself, to his age and youth, if he were to think of himself as an old man. Did he not have a grandfather who married his eighth or ninth wife while he was in his seventies? He again felt like a boy, the same age as his students, new blood rushing through his veins. He saw a beautiful carpet on which boats, gardens, birds and butterflies were painted, and which stretched between his house and the school; every morning he walked upon this carpet. No sooner did he see the girl sitting calmly in her seat, spreading her light like a lamp, than his body would be immersed in a delicious daze. He knew that the remit of her magic had increased and that he, like the students, had fallen under her spell. He would get through the lesson feeling happy, finishing up very quickly. He would be seized by a passion for her and wait impatiently until he saw her again the next day.

Mr Abd al-Hafiz did not know why, afterwards, he came to hate staying indoors, as if there was something inside him that was restricted by the houses, rooms and places that had ceilings, walls and doors. So he began to increase the frequency of his walks outside, in squares and public gardens. He would look at the sea, addicted to thinking about this girl who had suddenly entered his life just as she had entered his classroom, out of the blue. Over time he began to experience a strange feeling

وفي أثناء ذلك لم يتنبه الأستاذ عبد الحفيظ إلى أنه صار يعتني عظورته أكثر من ذي قبل، وأن البدلة التي كان يذخرها للعبد قد نسيت البدء، وأقارب يرميها كل يوم، وأنه صار يهتم بحلاقة وجهه ووضع الكولونيا فوقه كل صباح بعد أن كان يهمل حلاقةه إلا مرة واحدة أو مرتين في الأسبوع، ولأول مرة يفكر في هذه الأعوام التي انقضت من عمره ويدرك أنه خذل جمل الحياة مبكرًا حتى طن زورا ويهديته أنه قد أقرب من سن التقاعد في حين أنه لم يتجاوز الأربعين إلا بخمسة أو ستة أعوام، وأنه برغم الزوجة التي جف عودها والأطفال الذين يتسعون كنامل داخل البيت مازال في نضج رجوله وعفوناتها وأن الحياة ما زالت أمامه عريضة بكل ذاتها وطياتها، وأنه كان يظل نفسه ويظلم عمره ويظلم شبابه عندما يتصر أنه صار عجوزاً وينسي أنه لهذا تزوج أمه الثامنة أو التاسعة وهو في سن السبعين، وفي نفس الوقت، يحفز أنه عاد ولا يصرح في عمر تلاذته وأن دماء جديدة تخري كنامل في عروقه، ويرى انطلاقاً جميلة نغبته فوق قوارب وحدائق وواضات وأفئات قد امتد بين بيتة والمدرسة فيمضي كل صبح وفوقه، وما إن برآها في ارجله في هدوء إلى مقعدها وتشير كالدفء ضوءها، حتى يغمي جسمه خدور لينته فيدرك أن دائرة سحرها قد زادت انساها وشملته كما شملت الطيبة، ويعود مع درسه سعيداً، وتهبط اليوم سرعان، فيعاوده الشوق إليها ويتنظر بفارغ الصبر أن يراها في اليوم التالي.

ولا يدرى الأستاذ عبد الحفيظ لماذا - بعد ذلك - صار يكره البقاء في البيت كان في صدره شيئاً تضيق له البويوت والخجريات والأماكن التي لها سقف وحيدان وأبواب فصار يكثر النزول إلى الخلاء، والمنابر الخفية، وحدائق العناية، وتأمل البحر وإعداد التفكير في هذه البيت التي دخلت فيجاته حياته كما دخلت فيجاة حجرة درسه. وصار يوما وراء الآخر يحس بشيء غريب نحوها، شيء ينكره ويحبه ويخلمه وحلماً قليبه.
towards her, which filled his heart with fear. It was a sensation he did not want to express or acknowledge, except to himself. It was a strange creature that reared its head from under the ice mounts and appeared detached from the mind and will, defying all the rules and laws of one's being, challenging all the customs and traditions in which he believed, all the high ideals to which he had devoted himself. He refused to recognize or believe this, since to do so would bring about the disaster he was expecting.

Every morning he saw her sitting in her seat, innocently and meekly as though she was unaware of the odious struggle raging inside of him, which emitted a terrible deafening noise. While these light, unknown threads tied him so strongly to her, he resisted and fought as though allowing his heart to give in would result in his falling into a dark, bottomless abyss. If he gave his thought free expression it would hover around her and give rise to a frightful, massive shock that would cause all the buildings in the world to come crashing down on him. The blaze burned his heart; it was the first time in his life that he had felt this kind of inflamed passion, as though it had always been there, covered by a huge pile of ashes, until the arrival of this girl rekindled the cinders and they grew into a blazing inferno raging within him.

The biggest tragedy was that she had begun to come to him in a dream. It was not a dragon spewing fire, or a mythical creature with batwings; it was a beautiful young girl with an inviting glow who came to him in his sleep. He would meet her in a wide, open space, as though they were Adam and Eve suddenly fallen down to Earth, meeting up after having lost each other for many years. However, the meeting was a shock—a terrifying, sweet, horrible, beautiful and loathsome clash. Mr Abd al-Hafiz would awake from his sleep in a panic, begging God for forgiveness. He would stumble along to school, ashamed and confused. He did not have the strength to look at her, or at anyone else for that matter, as though anyone looking into his eyes would immediately discover a loathsome deed.
As the days went by, he became increasingly convinced of the fact that he was the victim of a secretly hatched conspiracy, and that he had been right from the start in seeing something diabolical in this scheming girl. She had begun to deceive him with her innocent and meek appearance, and she had caught him in her net. She had cast her black magic on him and masterfully ensnared him, and he now saw himself stumbling like a blind man towards a terrifying quagmire filled with turpitude, debauchery, godlessness and filth. He had become the victim of satanic, demonic or magic designs and actions. This feeling grew like a satanic flower within him, against all intelligence, logic and will. It grabbed hold of him, mocking ideals, traditions, morals and virtue. This feeling could not have come to him out of the blue; it had to be by design or as a result of some magical power. From the outset, he had imagined that something dreadful would come to pass. If it was an earthquake or Judgment Day, it did not happen. Instead, something more dreadful and terrifying happened. It had brought him to this chasm and made him – a teacher and educator – think about this girl in this shameful and terrifying way, which was devoid of morals, dignity and virtue. She was the age his daughter would be if he had one, and he would be her Religious Education teacher.

The only way to resist her spell would be to fight magic with magic. And so Mr Abd al-Hafiz began to delve into old, yellow-stained books with a frenzy that bordered on hysteria, in the hope of finding something that would counteract the effect of her book, which she had brought from the world of the dead and ghosts. Much to the surprise of his wife and children, he turned the house upside down searching for a trace of this magic. He began to dig up the threshold to the house with a pickaxe, given to the illusion that they had buried something for him there. He ripped the covers of the copybooks and schoolbooks in search of something the size of a safety pin hidden in one of them.
not hesitate to cut off all the hair on his head, since he thought that an alien body the size of a grain of dust had insinuated itself in his hair. He was convinced that all around him people were looking at him and whispering. He saw the school head threatening to dismiss him. He saw his wife take her children and leave for her family’s home. He saw his students laughing disdainfully and rudely when he arrived. All his suspicions had been confirmed. He had uncovered all their tricks. He knew that they were all plotting against him and using this girl to destroy his life. He was also convinced of the fact that his wife, students, the school head and teachers, the inspector from the Ministry and its directors, were all part of this conspiracy. Nothing could quench his thirst for revenge except to set fire to his home, the school and the Ministry without further ado. Mr Abd al-Hafiz resolutely proceeded to carry out this plan.

 ولم يتردد في خلافة شعر رأسه كله عندما ظن أن جسمًا غريبًا يحجم ذرة الغبار قد غافله ووضعوه في شعره، وتأكدت كل ظلون الاستاذ عبد الحاجة عندما رأهم يتهمسون في كل مكان من حوله، ورأى مدير المدرسة يقدم له إنذاراً بفصله من العمل، ورأى زوجته تأخذ أطفالها وتذهب إلى بيت أهلها، ورأى التلاميذ يضحكون في حضوره باستهتار وقلة أدب، تأكدت كل ظلونه وانكشفت أمامه كل أعباهم بأدرك أنهم جميعاً قد تآمروا ضده واستعملوا تلك الصبيحة لتدمير حياته، وأن زوجته وطلابه ومدير المدرسة ومدرسيها ومعتمدي الوزارة ومدرائها كلهم شركاء في هذه المؤامرة، وأن شيء يشفى غلبه إلا أن يحمل الآن ناراً ويذهب ليشعل الحرائق في البيت والمدرسة والوزارة. فمضى الاستاذ عبد الحاجة من فوره ينفذ هذه الرغبة بجزر وتصميم.
Language Notes

1. الهزار: interestingly enough, this is primarily used in ECA; MSA. Note that in the text, the phrase الهزار التقل fīl does not have its usual meaning of “heavy”; rather, in this context it refers to “difficult to laugh with”. In this context, one may refer to the Arabic expression دَمَّ رَفْقُ الْقَلْب, meaning “very serious” (of a person), as opposed to دَمَّ خْفِيف, “light-hearted”.

2. قد شعرت: عَلَى أَنْ قَدْ أَقْلَا: this expression, which consists of a finite verb followed by مَعْلُوم ("complete") + مَصْدُور of the same verb indicates that something is done to the fullest extent. Note, however, that this construction only occurs with verbs of realization and knowledge such as أَدْرَكَ وَعَرَفَ أَنْ. أَدْرَكَ:

3. أنْ عَفْرَيت: عَفْرَيت (also عَفْرَيت, pl. عَفْرَيت): this refers to a class of fantastic beings from the netherworld, known for their power and cunning. In contemporary folklore, they are regarded as a type of حِكَارِة (see حِكَارِة) or demon (while in Egypt it can also denote the ghost of a deceased person). The word عَفْرَيت is also commonly used to denote naughtiness, e.g. أَنْتَ عَفْرَيت, “you little devil” (e.g. to a child).

4. يا للعار: lit. “oh, the shame” (عَار, “shame”, “dishonour”). This expression is commonly used with reference to acts that are considered shameful. Also note the لَ after the vocative пا is pronounced ل. This construction (which is highly classical) can also be used with a proper noun: e.g. يا مُحْمَّد (meaning “come and help Mūḥammad”)

5. ما أَجْمَعَ: this is part of a common saying (رَجَلُ وَامْرَأَةٌ إِلا وَكَانَ الشِّيْطَانُ نَالَهُما), according to which the Devil is always the third person present (a metaphor for temptation and evil) when a man and a woman are alone...
Najīb Maḥfūz

Najīb Maḥfūz (Naguib Mahfouz) (1911–2006), is widely considered one of the most prolific and accomplished Arab writers of the twentieth century. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988 and wrote a total of thirty-five novels, fourteen collections of short stories and plays, as well as three collections of journalism.

Maḥfūz was born in the working-class district of Al-Jamaliyya in Cairo where he lived until the age of twelve, when his family moved to the ‘Abbasiyya suburb. Both districts provided the background for much of his writing.

After studying philosophy at Cairo University, he worked as a civil servant for many years alongside his journalistic activity, which included contributions to many Egyptian publications (e.g. al-Risāla, al-Hilāl and al-Abrām).

Thoroughly grounded in both classical and modern Arabic literature, Maḥfūz was also very familiar with, and influenced by, European authors such as Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Maupassant, Chekhov and the French philosopher Henri Bergson. Critics traditionally classify Maḥfūz’s work into four chronological phases: historical, realistic, modernist and traditional.

Maḥfūz’s literary career began with short stories, which he initially published in literary Egyptian magazines and then later as a collection of stories entitled ِْهَّمُسُ الْجَنُّون (The Whispers of Madness, 1938). Despite his great literary success, Maḥfūz continued to work as a civil servant in various government departments until his retirement in 1971.

After his early “historical” period, which included the novels رَادُوبيس (The Game of Fate, 1939), رَاذَْدَُوُبِس (Rhodopis, 1943) and كَفَاحُ الْجَلَالِي (The Struggle of Thebes, 1944), Maḥfūz’s interest in the 1950s shifted to the situation of the modern Egyptians and the impact social changes were having on the lives of ordinary people. His main work of this period is undoubtedly the so-called “Cairo Trilogy”, which consists of قَصْرُ الدِّمَشْقِي (Palace Walk, 1956), قَصْرُ الدِّيْنِ (Palace of Desire, 1957) and قَصْرُ السُّوْقِ (Sugar Street, 1957). All three are set in the Cairo of Maḥfūz’s youth and depict the vicissitudes of the family of al-Sayyid Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Jawādī over three generations, between World War I and 1950. This work is regarded by many critics as the pinnacle of the author’s realistic period.

After President Nasser’s death in 1970, Maḥfūz wrote the novel الكَرَنَكْ (Karnak, 1974), in which he attacked the police state and its nefarious effects on the population. Among Maḥfūz’s other works one may mention أَوْلَادُ حَارْبِنَا (The Children of Gebelawi, 1967); الْلِّيْبَىٰ وَالْكَلَابَ (The Thief and the Dog, 1961); مِيرامَار (Miramar, 1967); and رَحَّلَةٌ ابن مَطْوَمَةٌ (The Journey of Ibn Fattouma, 1983). His creative imagination is most vivid in مَحَاَجَةٌ لَيْلَةٌ (The Harafish, 1977) and لِيْلَيْ أَلْفُ لِيْلَةٌ (Arabian Nights and Days, 1982).

Despite being Egypt’s most popular writer and a national institution, Maḥfūz’s views did not meet with everyone’s approval, and in 1994 he narrowly survived an attempt on his life when he was stabbed by an unidentified attacker, thought to be a religious fundamentalist. The attack had a huge impact on his health and all but ended his writing career.

Thanks to the Nobel Prize, Maḥfūz was the first Arab author to gain popularity in the West, and nearly all his books have been translated into many languages.
The current story is taken from the collection (I Saw, in a Dream, 1982) and is a typical example of Mahfuz’s fascination with magical realism. A tale of conjoined Siamese twins is turned almost into a kind of tragic comedy. The descriptions of each twin, their preoccupations and moods, bear witness to Mahfuz’s vivid imagination and creative prowess. In more ways than one the story may also be regarded as an allegory of the relationship between individuals whose lives are inextricably (literally, in this case) linked with one another, and the contradictions and struggles that ensue from that bond.

Qismati and Nasibi
God had given Mohsen Khalil, the spice seller, everything his heart desired, except, that is, children. Many years went by, and still there were no children. Yet Mohsen Khalil tried very hard to be satisfied with what God had chosen to bestow upon him.

He was of medium height, which was fitting for one who believed in moderation in all things. He was overweight, but maintained that this was an attractive feature in both men and women, as well as a sign of prosperity. He was proud of his huge nose, his strong jawline and the mutual love that existed between him and other people.

Fate had smiled upon him by granting him Sitt Anabaya. In addition to being an excellent housewife, she was a buxom, fresh-looking beauty with luscious, rosy skin.

Chickens, geese and rabbits roamed freely atop their one-storey house. Devotees of Sitt Anabaya's cooking never ceased to wax lyrical about her splendid dishes and pastries made with lashings of traditional butter.

Life had been good to the couple in every respect, except in stubbornly denying them the joy of offspring. They had tried everything, but to no avail. Sitt Anabaya had sought the advice of loved ones as well as fortune-tellers, soothsayers and the like. She even visited shrines. Eventually, she went to see medical doctors. Unfortunately, their verdict was not encouraging in that the problem lay with both husband and wife. They added that there was hardly any hope left for them. And so, a dark cloud of sadness settled above the couple.

But just as Mohsen approached his forty-fifth birthday and Sitt Anabaya turned forty, their prayers were finally answered. When Sitt Anabaya was certain she was pregnant, she cried out: "Thank God and Sidi al-Kurdi, I'm pregnant!"

Mohsen was overjoyed and full of gratitude. The news soon circulated throughout al-Wayliya, the area near the Abbasiyya district where the couple lived and where Mohsen had his shop.
The wondrous nine months of waiting finally passed, and then came the hour of childbirth, with the cries of labour turning into a chant of joy for the couple.

As soon as the midwife picked up the baby, she stared at the infant in astonishment and bewilderment, and began to intone the traditional religious formulae. She hurried to the luxurious east wing of the clinic to look for Mohsen. When he saw the anxious look on the midwife’s face, he murmured in a worried tone:

“May God have mercy on us! What’s happened?”

She hesitated, and whispered: “It’s a strange creature, Mr Mohsen.”

“What do you mean?”

“The lower body is joined, but the upper half is split!”

“No!”

“Come and see for yourself.”

“How is Sitt Anabaya doing?”

“She is fine, but unaware of what is going on around her.”

Filled with anxiety and disappointment, Mohsen rushed towards the baby. He stared at the strange creature, the bottom half of which was indeed joined, with two legs and an abdomen, whereas the top half consisted of two parts, each with its own chest, neck, head and face. The twins were screaming together, as if each of them was protesting against his situation or demanding complete independence and freedom. Mohsen was overwhelmed by a variety of emotions – confusion, bewilderment, embarrassment, a sense of foreboding about the problems that lay in store – all of which gathered around him like dark, heavy clouds.

Inwardly, he began to repeat the traditional phrase that he normally used in business after a failed deal: “May God grant me profit!”

Indeed, he wished it were possible to get rid of this defect, so that he could have peace of mind. Going about her routine
الحكيم وهي مستغرفة في عملها الروتيني:
- صحة جيدة، كأن كل شيء طبيعي تماماً...
- فناسل عم حسن خليل:
- الاثنان?
- قالت الحكيمة بَحِيرة:
- ليسا توأمين... هذا وليد واحد!
فجهف الرجل عرق وجهه وجيبه المنصب من داخله ومن جو الصيف
وتبادل:
- ولم لا تعتبرهما أثين؟
- كيف يكونان أثين على حين أن انفصال جزء عن الجزء الآخر
- مستحيل!
- إنها مشكلة، لبئسًا لم تكن أصلًا!
- قالت الحكيمة بلبهجة وعظمة:
- إنه ورقة من الله على أي حال ولا يجوز الاعتقاد على حكمته...
فاستغرق الرجل ربه فواصلت الحكيمة:
- سأسجله اعتباره واحدًا.
- فتهد عم حسن قائلًا:
- ستصبح أحدثوة ونادرة!
- الصبر جميل!
- ألا يستحسن اعتباره أثين ذوي رتبة واحد؟
- لا يمكن أن يتعامل مع الحياة إلا كشخص واحد.
- وتبادلا النظر صامتين حتى سألته:
- لماذا تسليهما?
- ولم لا امر الصمت تساءلت:
- محمدين ۳۱!.. ما رأيك في هذا الاسم الناسب؟
- فهل رأسه مستسلمًا دون أن يبس؟. ولم انتهت ست عبئان لما حولها
- صغيت، وبكت طويلاً حتى احمرت عيناه الجميلتان. وشاركت زوجها
not last long, as both Sitt Anabaya and her husband responded to their parental instincts.

She started breastfeeding the baby on the right, and when the crying stopped, she fed the one on the left. Instinctively, she started calling the baby on the right "Qismati" and the one on the left "Nasibi," as these were the two names by which the newborn had been called since the first week.

Each child had his own individual personality; Qismati would be asleep while Nasibi remained awake, babbling, crying or suckling. As time went by, the astonishment waned, except outside the home. What was once odd and weird soon became familiar.

Both Qismati and Nasibi received their fair share of care, love and tenderness.

When family members came to visit, the mother would say: "No matter what, he is my son," or, "They are my sons."

As for Mohsen, he began to reiterate the phrase: "Ours is not to question the wisdom of God!"

Realizing that childhood does not last long, he thought about the future with worry and trepidation. Sitt Anabaya, for her part, was completely absorbed by her twin burden, as she had to breastfeed, change and raise not one but two children. She had to control her nerves when one of them slept and needed silence, while the other would wake up wanting to play.

Thank God, they had different features; Qismati had a deep brown complexion, with soft lineaments and hazel eyes, while Nasibi had a white complexion with black eyes and a large nose.

The twins began to crawl about on their two feet and four hands, uttering one word after another, and trying to walk. It became clear that Qismati learned to speak more quickly, but had to yield to Nasibi when it came to crawling and walking, or playing with things and destroying them.

Nasibi remained the dominant one in their early years,
which were marked by naughtiness, destruction, the chasing of chickens and the torturing of cats. Thanks to Qismatī’s submissiveness to Nasibī, the boys did not quarrel, except on those rare occasions when Qismatī would want to rest and Nasibī would prod him with his elbow, making Qismatī cry continuously.

When they turned four, or just afterwards, they began looking out the window at the children outside. They would raise their eyes towards the sky from the rooftop and ask a multitude of questions:

"Why does each boy have only one head?"

Confused, Sitt Anabaya answered: "God creates people the way He sees fit."

"Always God ... God ... Where is He, this God?"

Mohsen answered: "He sees us, but we do not see Him. He can do anything, and woe unto those who disobey Him!" He told them what they needed to do in order to gain His approval.

Qismatī grew worried and told Nasibī:

"Listen to me, or I will hit you ..."

They would watch the moon during the summer nights, and extend their arms towards it. While Qismatī sighed with resignation, Nasibī would erupt with anger. This prompted Mohsen Khalil to ask:

"Do we imprison them in the house forever?"

Sitt Anabaya said: "I am worried they’ll be bullied by other children ..."

Hajj Mohsen decided to carry out an experiment. He sat on the doorstep of the house in a wicker chair, and placed his children in another chair beside him. Children of all ages soon gathered around them to take a closer look at the strange creature, and no manner of rebuke or reprimand could stop them. The father had no alternative but to pick them up and carry them back into the house, whispering with grief: "The problems have started."
However, an idea came to Sitt Anabaya by divine inspiration. She suggested that she could convince her neighbour to send her son Tariq and daughter Samiha to play with Muhammadayn. The neighbour, Mashkura, agreed. So Tariq and Samiha came over; Tariq was a year older than Muhammadayn, whereas Samiha was the same age.

At first, they panicked and did not want to become friends with Muhammadayn. Sitt Anabaya bribed them with presents until they became used to them. The neighbour’s children were also led by their curiosity and sense of adventure.

In the end, Qismati and Nasibi were pleased with their new playmates, but the fact that they greatly loved having them around did not mean that their love was returned.

They talked about many things, played various games and invented lots of stories. And so, they found others to whom they could throw their football and with whom they could play tug-of-war.

Samiha became the object of their desire, with each of them wanting to keep her for himself. When they watched television, they would argue about who would sit next to her.

It was because of Samiha that they had their first real fight in front of their family, which led to a bloody lip for Qismati and black eyes for Nasibi. This incident marked Qismati’s freedom from Nasibi; thenceforth, he felt an individual in his own right. From that moment on, both of them could agree and disagree.

One day, Hajj Mohsen said: “They are now at an age that they should go to school.” Sitt Anabaya frowned, her face showing the guilt she felt inside. Then he said: “This is not open to discussion!” After thinking for a long time, he added: “I will bring them teachers. They should at least learn to count so that they can take my place in the shop.”

Teachers came and instructed the boys in the basics of religion, language and mathematics. Qismati’s response to learning was very encouraging. Nasibi, on the other hand, had...
no desire to learn, and hence was slower in his understanding. As a result, he resented his brother and disturbed classes by singing, playing and childish teasing. The difference was especially irritating during the religious education classes, which Qismati took to with enthusiasm while Nasibi displayed total indifference. The teacher was doubly annoyed by Nasibi’s stubbornness. Mohsen reprimanded Nasibi on many occasions, but could not bring himself to hit him.

At the age of eight, Qismati wanted to pray and fast, and despite the fact that Nasibi was not interested, the latter found himself participating in the ablutions to a great extent, while being more or less forced to bow and prostrate. Realizing the weakness of his position, he had no choice but to resign himself to the facts. At the same time, he became consumed with anger.

Nasibi was ordered by his father to fast, but he tried to break his fast in secrecy in order to allay his hunger. Qismati, however, was quick to protest, saying: “Don’t forget that we share one abdomen. If you take a single morsel, I’ll tell Father.” Nasibi was patient on that occasion, but it did not last, and he started to cry. His mother took pity on him, and told her husband:

“God only demands of a soul what it can bear.” Let the boy be until he’s one or two years older.”

Confused, the father replied: “If he breaks his fast, he will break the fast of the other as well!”

The problem was only solved by the Imam of the Sidi al-Kurdi mosque, who claimed that it was the intention that counted. So Qismati’s fast was lawful even if it was broken by Nasibi. And so Qismati continued to fast even if Nasibi did not.

Each of them had now developed his own personality. They increasingly grew to dislike one another, and the moments in which they got on became few and far between. Tearfully, their mother said: “My God, they cannot stand each other, yet neither can live without the other. How can they go through life like this?”

والاستيعاب، ومن أجل ذلك حنط على الآخر، وكذّر ساعات مذاكرته بالعبث والغاء والمعاكسات الصبيانية، وبدأ الخلاف مزعاً في تقبل التربية الدينية التي أقبل عليها قسمتي قلب مفتوح على حين وقف فيها قسيس موقف اللامبالاة. وضاعف زجر المعلم من عائده، وتهيأ أبوه كثيراً ولكنه أشغف من ضربه.

واعد بلغ الثامنة أراد قسمتي أن يصل ويبصم. ومع أن نصبي لم يمل إلى ذلك إلا أنه وجد نفسه يشارك بقدر لا يستهان به في الوضع، وأنه يرغب تقريباً على الركوع والسجود. وشعر به بضعف مركزه أذاع للمواقع وهو يتملي حقناً وغيظاً. وأمره أبوه بالصيام، وهاول أن يشيع جوعه في الحفاء، ولكن قسمتي احتح قالاً:

- لا تنس أن بطتنا واحد، وإذا تناوت لقمة واحدة أخبرت أبي...

وصبر يومه حتى نفد صبره فكيفرقت له أمه وقالت للجحاح:

- الله لا يكلف نفساً إلا وسعها، دعه حتى يكبر عاماً أو عامين.

فقال الأب في حيرة:

- ولكنه إذا أفتر أفتر الآخر!

وهي مشكلة لم يحلها إلا إمام سيدي الكردي فقال إن العزة بالنية وأن صم قسمتي صحيح حتى لو أفتر نصبي. وصام قسمتي رغم إفتر نصبي مستنداً إنيه أولاً وأخيراً، وتوعد لكل شخصيته، وحال بيهما نفور دائم آخ في الاستفعاله، وندرت بينهما أوقات الصفاء. وقالت الأم بعين دامعه:

- يا ويلي، لا يطبع أخوه أخوه، ولا غنى لأحدهما عن الآخر.

فكيف ثمي بهما الحياة!?
مضت على الشوك، وشمل الخلاف أشياء وأشياء. قسمتي يحب النظافة ونصبي يكره فكرة الاستحمام إلا أنني يضطر إليه اضطراراً، وتوسط الوالدان على أن ينزل قسمتي عن شيء من النظافة تظهر أن ينزل نصبي عن كثير من الغذارة.

ونصبي نهم لا يشع فكراً ما كان يصاب قسمتي بالتخمة. ولقسمتي ولع بالاغاني الغامضة على حين يشغف نصبي الأناشيد الصاخبة. أما ذروة الخضاب فقد احتملت لحب قسمتي النامي للقراءة والإطلاع، يحب أن يقرأ كثيراً والآخر يفضل الكلب فوق السطح ومعاكسة السايلة والجيران. ونصبي يمكن أن يسرق ساعة على إنهماك الآخر في القراءة ولكنه عند الضرورة يعرف كيف يفسد عليه تركيزه واستغراقه حتى ينشتبكا في معركة تسفر عادة عن أنصار نصبي. وقال له قسمتي مجرد محاولة إبداعية من العنف غير المجد:

- لي هواياتي ولك هواياتك ولكن هواياتي أنت لطوفنا غير الطبيعية.

فقال نصبي بحلة:

- معنى ذلك أن تتحول الحياة إلى سجن دائم.
- لكن لا نصيب لنا في الدنيا الخارجية.
- السعادة في الدنيا والكابحة في الحجرة.

فقال قسمتي:

- إنك تعكس الناس فيهالوش عليك بالسخرية.
- أموت لو فعلت غير ذلك بل إي أفكر في اقتحام الطريق.
- ستجعل منا أضحكوا وفرجة...

فصاح نصبي:

- وإني أكره السجن وأحسب النجوم.

فقال قسمتي براحة:

- يلزمك الكثير من العقل.
- فقال نصبي بازداً:

- لا سبيل إلى الاتفاق.
"But as you can see, we're one, despite the fact that there's two of us!"

"That's the problem! But you have to submit to me without resisting."

"You're stubborn and you love to argue."

Their parents called them into the living room for a meeting. They no longer had any peace of mind, and their happiness was ruined. They believed that tragedy would strike the household if they did not remedy the situation quickly. Sitt Anabaya kissed them both, and said: "You have to love each other; if you do, all problems will vanish."

Nasibi said: "He's the one who hates me!"

But Qismati retorted: "You're the one who hates me!"

Despondently, Sitt Anabaya said: "You're two in one, inseparable, and there must be love."

Hajj Mohsen then said: "Reason demands that you get on, otherwise your life will become hell. It is not acceptable for one of you to oppress the other. It is possible to live together in harmony. Nasibi should be patient when Qismati wants to read, and in return Qismati should willingly agree to play with Nasibi. You also have to accept to listen to different kinds of songs so that each can enjoy his favourite music. As for religion, that's not open for discussion!"

Qismati said: "I'm all in favour of harmony, even if it will cost me dearly." Nasibi kept silent, and Qismati added: "He's the one who doesn't like harmony, nor will he be ready for the day you ask us to work in the shop!"

The father replied firmly: "There's no escape from the unavoidable!"

Sitt Anabaya implored with vehemence:
"You must love each other, as this is your salvation."

However, the parents still did not have any peace of mind. They looked on, fraught with worry and grief.

Nasibi hesitantly tried to change for the sake of harmony, which involved a constant fight to overcome his indomitable instincts. Qismati, for his part, embarked upon the new path with greater determination and will in order to put an end to his ordeal, appealing to his parents for help when necessary.

As they reached the age of reason and were on the verge of adolescence, their problems reached a peak. Their suppressed dreams began to manifest themselves, threatening to explode. Each of them developed his own way of thinking, and regarded the other as a threatening intruder, an enemy that must be defeated. They were both fed up with the hateful unity that fate had inflicted upon them and from which there was no escape. They would clash in a vortex of fiery and crazed outbursts. A raging wave would emerge from the depths, removing any sense of shame, while impetuosity superseded regret.

Their anger would grow and they engaged in battle, exchanging the harshest of blows. Afterwards the hostilities would die away, with the combatants becoming immersed in silence and distress. This lasted for a long time, until Qismati said: "Because of this curse, life cannot go on peacefully."

Calmly but petulantly, Nasibi replied: "But it will go on like this anyway!"

Qismati's hazel eyes grew darker, and he said: "We're condemned to be without the harmony that the rest of mankind enjoys."

"You're sick, and so are your ideas."

Qismati replied sarcastically: "It is clear that one of us is sick."

Defiantly, Nasibi retorted: "I will no longer give up any of my rights. There will be no more truce from now on."

"But I've got rights, too!"
They looked at each other, defiantly, sorrowfully. All dialogue thus ended on the worst possible terms.

It was then that they saw Samiha, their childhood friend, in a new light. From the window, they would watch her come and go, either on her own or in the company of her mother, which awakened past memories that soon faded.

That day, however, they saw another Samiha. The flush of youth had matured her, adding even more radiance and increasing her desirability. Qismati got drunk on the nectar of temptation, while Nasibi’s wild imagination got the better of him. Qismati’s heart was touched by a ray of beauty, just as a flower is touched by a ray of sunlight and opened up by it. He wished she were next to him, instead of that wretched Nasibi, and for the first time he felt that Nasibi was not only a physical burden but also an insurmountable obstacle to his true happiness.

Nasibi continued to shake his head in bewilderment, and when he saw the girl waiting next to the entrance of her house, he rushed to the street, dragging Qismati with him. Samiha saw them shooting across the street, then took a few steps back and smiled. Nasibi lunged towards her, extending his hands to her chest, which caused her to panic and run inside her house. This animalistic attack drew the attention of some passers-by in Wayliya Street, and so they returned home, with Qismati berating and cursing Nasibi, who had come to his senses and grown quite submissive.

Qismati’s fury bore down heavily on his brother: “This is scandalous! You’re nothing but a lunatic . . .!”

Nasibi was at a loss, and did not reply. Their mother knew what had happened, and was distressed. When Qismati told her the truth, she said to Nasibi: “You will destroy yourself one day . . .”

Qismati lashed out: “And he will destroy me along with him, through no fault of mine!”

Nasibi said, boldly: “We need a wife!” The mother was
استف付け إلى زوجة!
فمن الأم ولدنا فإنك مسؤول عن تزويننا من بنت الخلال."}
them!"

Such a wretched creature, in both looks and circumstance, indeed came to the house. They fed her and cleaned her up so as to make her agree to what they wanted her to do. This was followed by a period of calm, at least on the surface. In reality, Nasibi mistreated the woman during the daytime, to compensate for his nocturnal torments. Qismati, for his part, appeared gloomy and disgusted. He asked Nasibi: "What have I done to deserve this?"

Nasibi answered, fretfully: "Is it my fault, then?"

Qismati did not reply. He remembered Samiha, who had stolen his heart, and his suppressed emotions exacerbated his grief. The truth is that both of them felt lost and worthless, but neither felt the pain of the other. Quite the contrary! Each accused the other of being responsible for their hardship, and each wished he could get rid of the other at all cost.

Their father asked them to work with him in the shop, if only for the sake of experience. They could no longer avoid this, and so on a calm spring day they started work. They were dressed in a pair of grey trousers and two white, short-sleeved shirts. Their hair was cut to an average length. Confused, they stood behind the counter. Very quickly, a crowd of customers and onlookers gathered, until half the street was blocked. Hajj Mohsen addressed his sons: "Just do your work, and don't pay any attention to the people."

However, Nasibi was gripped with anger, while Qismati's eyes were soon filled with tears. All of a sudden a press photographer made his way through the crowd and took a lot of pictures of the two brothers. In the afternoon, a representative from the television station arrived, seeking permission to interview the two young men. However, Hajj Mohsen resolutely refused, his voice betraying anger. When the pictures appeared in the morning papers, they drew even more onlookers to the shop, while sales dwindled. Hajj Mohsen was forced to prohibit them

وجاءت امرأة تعيسة الحال والمنظر، نشطوا إلى تغذيتها وتبادفتها لرضي بما براد بها، وأعقب ذلك سكون ظاهر علئ الأقل، ألم في الواقع فإن تصبي كان يبيع عمالة المرأة نهاراً كتعويض عن انفاضة الليلي، وأما

- ما ذنبي أنا؟
- فنهره تفاصيل:
- وهل الذنبد ذنبي؟!

لم يحر جواباً لكنه تذكر سمية بلبته المسلوب، وعواطفه المحتاجة

المحرومة فضفاضة أسان. والحق أن كليهما شعر بالضياع والهولان، ولكن لم يشعر أحدهما بتعاسة الآخر، وعلى العكس اتجهته بأنه المسؤول عن مأساته، لودد يتخلص منه بأي ثمن ودهامه الأب للعمل في الدكان لوح كجريئة لا مفر من ممارستها. كان يوم حضورهما في الدكان يوماً معتدل المناخ من أيام الربع، تجلباً للأعفاء في بطانتي رمادي، وقصصين أميين نصف كامأ شعر رأسهما فاستوى مشدداً متوسط الطول، وقفاً وراء الطاولة متريكن، وسرعان ما تجمعت كبريت ما بين زبون ومترفج حتى ازدحم الطريق إلى نصفه. وقال الحاج موضعاً خطابه لابنها:

- استغرقا في العمل ولا تبالية بالناس.

ولكن الغضب ملك تصبي على حين دمعت عينه تقسيم. وإذا مصور

صحيح يشق طريقه بين الجموع ويقطع العديد من الصور لمحمدين أو

قسمي ونصبي. وفي النصف الثاني من النهار جاء مندوب من التلفزيون

يستأذن في إجراء حوار مع الشابين، ولكن الحاج رفض يحزم وعبارة شديدة

الغضب. ونشر الصور في الصحيفة الصباحية أخذ إقبال الناس وهب البع

لتدرة الدنيا، فاضطر الحاج محسن خليل لمنعهما من الذهاب إلى الدكان.
وقال لامرأته بقلب متروnk:
- سوف نقصي التجارة عقب انتهاء الأجل؟
- وعد بذلك تسامل نصيبي غاضباً
- لم تتخلى عن كل مناعب ولا الدنيا! لم ترحمنا وترحم نفسك؟
- فقال الحاج في غياب شديد:
- لن تعفرنا الضياء أبداً. وسيران ما يحقق لكم الستر والكرامة.
- فحقق نصيبي:
- لا قيمة للمال وحده، الواقع أنت ميتان، كم تهنيت أن أمارس التجارة
- وأتباع سيرة وتزوج من أربع!
- وقال قسمتي في حسرة:
- وعند الاستعداد لاكون أستاداً، وأمارس السياسة أيضاً.
- ونظر نصيبي إلى قسمتي وقال بحق:
- فإن القبة التي تسد طريقي.
- فقال قسمتي بإصرار:
- أنت أنت العقبة.
- فقسمل الحاج:
- ألا تسلمان بالواقع وتسعين إلى السعادة معًا؟
- فقال قسمتي:
- لو خلقنا برأس وأسفين منفصلين لهان الأمر!
- فقال الحاج بجراء:
- لن تعز السعادة على من يشدها بصدق.
- فقال قسمتي بحق:
- هذه السعادة هي سبب تعاستنا!
- ثم التفنت نحو نصيبي قائلاً:
- تخل عن عنجنهتك واتبعي تغلق أقصى درجات الرفعة والسعادة، أما
- لو تعتقد أنك فيكون مصرينا السجن.
- فقال نصيبي ساخرًا:
work! We are completely different. I do not love knowledge; as for politics, if you elected a government, I would immediately side with the opposition, and vice versa. I will not follow you, and you will not follow me; the fighting will not subside.”

Impatiently, the father said: “Try to live together in harmony again; it’s the only way! It’s your destiny, as is your union.”

Reluctantly, they again attempted to avoid conflict and disagreement as much as they could. Each of them made an effort to put up with the other’s presence, despite Qismati’s hidden unease and Nasibi’s inner scorn.

They seemed like two friends without a friendship, in an alliance without sincerity. They each lived half a life, and had half-hopes. However, age prematurely left its traces on Nasibi’s face, revealing that he was rapidly approaching old age, perhaps as a result of his excesses in most things. He started to complain about a loss of libido, an allergy to drink, and indigestion. Neither herbal potions nor conventional medicine succeeded in improving his condition. In his pain, he expressed the suppressed rage he felt towards his brother, accusing him: “You were jealous of me, damn you!”

Qismati murmured, in a conciliatory tone: “May God forgive you!”

He replied: “Don’t look down your nose at me! If I die, you’ll have to carry my body till the end of your days and you’ll turn into a grave!”

Nasibi’s health deteriorated to such an extent that he was gripped by a fear of death. Qismati felt sorry for his brother’s decline, and tried to cheer him up: “You’ll get even better than you were before!”

Nasibi did not care what Qismati said, nor did he believe it. One morning, he woke up early and shouted: “I’m going to the home of the weeping truth!”

Sitt Anabaya rushed to him, realizing that he was dying. She held him close and started reciting the Surah of Fidelity. Then
he stopped breathing.

Qismati wept, but was suddenly gripped by fear and panic at having a corpse joined to his torso. The two parents exchanged a confused look. What could they do with this body that they could not bury? They hastily summoned a doctor, who examined the situation and said:

“This is a very complex issue, but there is no solution except mummification of the body if it’s impossible to excise it.”

And so Qismati lived on, carrying the mummified body of his sibling. He soon realized that he was going to be half-alive and half-dead, and that the newly acquired freedom he had so often longed for was nothing but an illusion, which had turned into half a life or no life at all. He decided to immerse himself in work now that the obstacle had been removed. However, he discovered that he had become a different person; one who had suddenly been born fully formed but whose enthusiasm had dwindled, his inner urges dried up, his zeal abated and his taste for life dulled. He was a person who had relinquished life, worship and innocent daily pleasures, one who lived under a sky surging with dust, devoid of colour, clouds, stars or a horizon.

He said, a deep sadness pervading his very being: “Death is in the universe.”

Most of the time he remained silent, withdrawn in a state of lethargy. Then, his mother asked him: “Why don’t you entertain yourself and do something?”

He replied: “I’m doing the only thing I can do, which is to wait for death.”

He saw the darkness descend upon him, holding out the promise of peace.
Language Notes

1. قسمتي ونصبي: lit. "my destiny and my fate", this is a common expression of resignation, e.g. "marriage is a matter of fate". The word قسمة is also sometimes used as a phrase of condolence, e.g. هذه قسمة ("such is fate"), whereas it is also the etymon of the English word 'kismet' (albeit via Turkish).

2. عم: lit. "[paternal] uncle". It is, however, often used as a term of address for an older man; عم is another form of بعم.

3. العطار: lit. "perfume seller" (عطر, "perfume"), this is a grocer who sells herbs and spices as well as traditional herbal medicines.

4. أجزاَلَ الله لِهِ العطاءُ فيما يحبُّ ويتمنى: lit. "God generously gave him what he likes and hopes for."

5. ذرَّةً (u), "to scatter"; cf. دَرْءُ (u), "atom" (atomic energy). Synonyms include (أَسْللَا) "smile" and (نَصْبُ) "mental image". ذرَّةً is also often used in the sense of "time"; cf. الزَّمن.

6. معَ مُحاجَة لِلنفس لِترضَّى بمَا وَهَبَ الله وَما مَنَعَ: lit. "with exertion of the soul to content oneself with what God has granted and withheld".

7. آهَة: (ECA) < آه > ("beauty, magnificence"); used to refer to respect based on wealth and smart dress.

8. عَلَى: lit. "luck loved him".

9. ستَم: general term of address used for women (with their first name); it is equivalent to سيدة in MSA. The word is also used in the phrase "ستَم بيت", "housewife".

10. إلى جانب her (كونها): contracted form of إلى (كونها) and the phrase "بالإضافة إلى".

11. طَاجِن: pl. of طاجنة a traditional earthenware cooking pot; (2) a dish made of meat, rice or vegetables. The ingredients vary from one country to another.

12. فِطَارِئ: pl. of فطيرة, round layered pastries.

13. تُطَارِئ: lit. "swimming in" (i.e. "soaked with/in").

14. السَّمَة البَلْدِي: unclarified butter, ghee.

15. وَدْوَرَة الْأَجْهَة: "consultation" in this context has a religious connotation (cf. Qur. 38: الدورة المشروة).

16. أَهْل اللَّه: lit. "People of God" (i.e. "God-fearing people"); أَهْل is often used as a head in a genitive construction (إضافية) in the sense of "those who are", e.g. أَنْتَ أَهْلُ الكَرْم ("you are generous people"). It also often means "family" or "kinsfolk". Indeed, it is this latter meaning that is meant in the common greeting حَوَّلْكَ السَّكَى (see note No 50).

17. العارفين والواصلين: Sufi terms denoting certain ranks; in this story, however, it means those who know and are connected, e.g. المُعَارِفُ بِاللَّهِ ("he who knows well"), "fortuneteller".

18. الأَمْرَة: pl. of أمارة, "tomb", "grave". People in Muslim countries traditionally go to these shrines to ask for favours or be granted wishes. In Cairo, the famous shrines include those of أبو طيب المتنبي and الحسين.

19. يا أَطْفَفَ يا رَبْ: "Goodness gracious me"; يا أَطْفَفَ is often used to express astonishment, or to beseech God's kindness and mercy.

20. وَحَقَّ: introduction to an oath, such as وَحَقَّ الْأَلْفَ ("by the Prophet") or وَحَقَّ الله ("by God"), which is equivalent to and بِاللَّهِ ("by God")

21. وَحَقَّ: a shrine and mosque in Cairo.

22. الوَلِيدَة: a popular district in Cairo (also known as الحليمة).

23. العَلَمَة: a large and popular district in Cairo.

24. خِصَاصِي: "labour pains" (خصس (a), "to be in labour"); also آلام مولدة.

25. حَكِيمَة: MSA قاِبِلة مَوْلَدَة "midwife" (ECA); مولادة MSA طب "doctor" (cf. MSA طبيب). The word حكيمة means "sage" or "doctor" (cf. MSA طبيب).

26. نَعْمَان: see حكيمة, note No 42.

27. "may our Lord show mercy on us"; generally
used to express astonishment (see also above).  
29. يُفْتَعِّلُ اللَّهُ: lit. “God opens”; in this context it is best translated as “better luck next time”.
31. مَهْدُ: dual of مُهْد. Proper name used primarily in Egypt; cf. مهْدَةً.
32. دُوْنَ أَنْ يَنْتَبِسُ مَهْدًا: “without uttering” (short for دُوْنَ أَنْ يَنْتَبِسُ مَهْدًا).  
33. أَدَى الْفَرْضَةَ: lit. “he carried out a divine duty” (pl. فَرْضَةٌ or فَرْضٌ “something apportioned, made obligatory”) and is a religious duty or obligation for which the believer will be rewarded (whereas omission leads to punishment). Performing the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, for instance, is a فَرْضٌ. Islamic law distinguishes between فَرْضٌ عَلَىْ (individual obligation such as prayer, etc) and فَرْضٌ كَفَأَةٌ (collective obligation such as جَهَاد).
34. بُعْدَةٌ قَادِر: lit. “by the strength or power of the one who possess power” (القَادِرٍ is one of the so-called ninety-nine “beautiful names” – الأَسْمَاء الْحَسَنَى – of God). This expression is often used to mean “as if by miracle”.
35. العَفْرَةٌ, عَفْرَتْ, to behave like an عَفْرَةٌ (see صفحة من كتاب المولى, note No 4).
36. “small period of time”; diminutive of أَوْقَاتٍ (pl. of وقت).
37. “woe unto ...”; cf. الوُلُجَّ نَا, “woe us!”.  
38. إلى ما شَاء الله: lit. “until God wishes”; used here in the sense of “forever”, “indefinitely”.
39. جَزَّرَان: “bamboo”; “cane”; “reed”.  
40. الملا WWW La جَمَاعَةٌ: “in front of all people”; cf. إِنَّ بَابَ مَعْقَلٍ.
41. إِنَّهُ بَاب مَعْقَلٍ: lit. “it is a closed door” (i.e., “the subject is closed”).
42. يُقَدِّرُ لا يُسْهَبٌ: lit. “in an amount that is not to be belittled” (i.e., “not to be sneered at”).
43. الركوع: حكاية القنديل, note No 41.
44. حوَائِلُ السُّجُود. Cf. sura 2:286 (“Impose not on us that which we have not the strength to bear!”).
45. قُدُرٌ, “destiny” (also قضاء).
46. الْفَرْضِ الْقُدْرِيَّةَ: “divine connection”.
47. فَرْضٌ: lit. “daughter of lawfulness” (also “Miss Right”); cf. ابن الخلال (also “Mr Right”).
48. أَشْخَاصٌ: ECA “a show”, “scene”.
49. عَقْبَةِ الْأَحْلَال: lit. “after the end of the appointed time”, i.e. after one’s death.
50. الصَّمْدٌ: this is a reference to sura 112 (الإِلَهَّاتَ, “devotion”), which is commonly known as الصَّمْد. The Eternal One” appears in the first line of the verse.
Hanān al-Shaykh

Born in Beirut in 1945, Hanān al-Shaykh is one of the leading women authors in the Arab world today. She is known as a novelist, short-story writer, playwright and essayist. Raised in a conservative Muslim family from the Ra’s al-Nab’a district, she started writing at an early age, publishing essays in the daily An-Nahar from the age of sixteen. After completing her university education at the American College for Girls in Cairo (1963–66), she returned to Beirut to work as a journalist at the An-Nahar magazine and then at An-Nahar.

It was during her stay in Egypt that she wrote her first novel, انتحار رجل ميت (Suicide of a Dead Man), which deals with relationships between the sexes and patriarchal control in Middle Eastern societies. It was eventually published in 1970. Five years later she published her second novel, فروض السقاطان (The Praying Mantis).

In 1976, she fled from Lebanon to Saudi Arabia because of the civil war, and came to international prominence with her next novel, حكاية زهرة (The Story of Zabra, 1980), which was later translated into English (1994). The novel revolves around the eponymous heroine, a young woman who tries to take advantage of the Lebanese civil war to escape oppression. Banned in most Arab countries, the book was initially published at the author’s expense, as no publisher was prepared to do so on account of its controversial subject matter. Not much later – in 1982 – al-Shaykh moved to London, where she still resides.

In 1983, her short story The Persian Carpet, which focuses on the effects of divorce on children, appeared in the multi-author volume entitled Arabic Short Stories (trans./ed. D. Johnson-Davies). In 1989 she published مشاك الغزلا (Women of Sand and Myrrh), which was also translated into English (1992). Despite the fact that this novel, too, was banned in many Arab countries, it was named as one of the ’50 Best Books of 1992’ by Publishers Weekly. It tells the story of four women in an unnamed Middle Eastern country and their dealings with the patriarchal society in which they live.

In 1992, al-Shaykh published بريد بيروت (Beirut Blues), a collection of ten letters written by the protagonist Asmahân during the Lebanese civil war to various people both dead and alive. The novel, the English translation of which appeared in the same year, received a great deal of critical acclaim in the West. In 1994 she published a collection of seventeen short stories entitled أكتس السقاطان على السطوح (I Sweep the Sun off Roofops), the English translation of which was released in 2002.

The English translation of one of her recent novels, إنها لندن يا عزيزي (Only in London, 2000), was shortlisted for The Independent Foreign Fiction Prize. In the novel, Hanān al-Shaykh explores the lives of people caught between Eastern and Western cultures and traditions. In the 1990s, she also wrote two plays, which appeared only in English translation – Dark Afternoon Tea (1995) and Paper Husband (1997). Both deal with the lives of immigrants in London.

The story “Yasmin’s Picture” is taken from وردة الصحراء (Desert Flower), published in 1982, at the height of the civil war and after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. The protagonists of the story are a couple who have left their home in the war-torn southern suburbs of Beirut and sought refuge outside the city. Thus displaced, they live in an eerily empty building, where the
male protagonist becomes obsessed with the absent character mentioned in the title. The storyline focuses almost entirely on the man, who, like so many men in the author's oeuvre, is rather weak, unable to make any decisions by himself. He married his wife because she chose him; he moved to this new flat, seeking shelter, because his sister-in-law suggested it to him. In an attempt to escape the harsh reality of war, he becomes fixated on the female owner of the flat in which they are staying. He builds up a picture of her in his mind based on her photographs, diaries, letters and record collection. At the same time, he completely ignores his pregnant wife; she is totally on the margins of his thoughts. His escapism means he is living in an imaginary world of his own making. The story is an allegory of the way in which war victims deal with the traumatic events that impinge upon them, and seek comfort wherever they can.

صورة ياسمين

Yasmine's Picture
Once again, he found himself in front of her picture, gazing at those feline eyes, her rising, tanned forehead, delicate small nose and full lips. He looked at her shiny black hair, with wayward wisps like those of a child.

He turned to his wife and asked: “Is she as beautiful as in the picture?”

She replied, raising the bedcover: “I only had a glimpse of her from a distance, when she was with Nawal.”

He paused to think while his eyes moved to the bedsheets; even the beauty of her bedsheets was different, as they appeared to have the natural colours of the shells found in all the world’s oceans. As he was about to close the balcony door, the peacock feathers in the copper container stirred.

He remembered once seeing his wife breaking peacock feathers in half so as to make them fit into the rubbish bin. The feathers had been a wedding present from the switchboard operator in his office at the Ministry. He had not been annoyed with his wife for not liking them. Indeed, he did not know of anyone decorating their house with peacock feathers, except in the countryside. He had not imagined them looking so beautiful when they were spread out; they gave the bedroom a poetic atmosphere.

He slowly took off his clothes. When he undid the buttons of his trousers, he suddenly found himself looking at the picture on the dressing table. He lay down on the bed; his wife was sitting in front of the mirror, applying creams to her face with cotton wool. He thought of Yasmine, the woman in the picture, and imagined her sitting there instead of his wife. He wondered whether her body was as fine-boned as her face. He closed his eyes and looked at the coral clothes rack, the like of which he had never seen before, except for the black one in his grandfather’s house. The rack he was looking at had straw and canvas hats hanging on it, as well as pearl necklaces. When he felt his wife climbing into bed he asked her: “How old is she?” She thought he was dreaming.

They awoke to the sound of explosions disturbing the calm
of dawn. He sat up in bed, saddened and exasperated. How was it possible that the ceasefire was violated after only five days? He cleared his throat and imagined himself today, tomorrow and the day after a prisoner in this flat. He wished he had not taken the advice of his sister-in-law, Nawal, to leave their flat in Chiyah. He wished he had listened to his wife and stayed in their own house, in spite of its dangerous location and the fact that she was eight months pregnant. He would be enjoying the company of the neighbours now, playing cards or backgammon with them and, if necessary, they could take refuge in the shelter with the rest of the people.

In this quiet building, however, he had never seen anyone at the entrance, not even a child playing. He had pretended more than once to be waiting for the lift without ever pressing the button in the hope of meeting one of the inhabitants of the building, so he could introduce himself to them and exchange a few words about current events and the war. Perhaps others could share their hopes or even pessimism with him, it didn’t really matter which. He just wanted to hear a voice other than that of the radio or his wife. Even the telephone was cut off. The flat was totally quiet, except for the twitter of the orange canary that started to annoy him, as its chirruping would increase every time it heard gunfire.

He had not heard a single footstep in the clean entrance hall to the building. Despite the sounds of explosions, the pictures of the sea, the mirrors and the fig tree remained still. As he went up to the flat, he remembered that the last time he had talked to anyone in the building was to the guard, who was carrying his son while hurrying his wife along with insults as they got ready to leave for Akar. He’d asked the guard with some anxiety: “Who will guard the building in your absence?” He’d replied: “How can you be afraid when you have a colonel living in the building? You’re extremely lucky.”

“We’re extremely lucky,” his wife said, as she opened the.
kitchen cupboards and looked at the bags of provisions, the
rinses of food, the crates of water, the pile of flat bread loaves in
the fridge and several gas cylinders on the side of the balcony.

“If they were so well prepared, and if their flat was so safe,
why did they leave then?” Moments later, he blamed himself
for thinking that all people need is food and drink.

He walked around the house, going into every room. He was
content with just looking; he opened cupboards and drawers. 
His wife smiled and told him: “So, what are you up to?” He
answered with a lie: “I am looking for a book, a draughtboard—
anything to pass the time with.”

She said: “When Nawal met Yasmine in Europe and told her
that I was pregnant, Yasmine made her swear to make me look
for babies’ clothes, maternity dresses and anything else that
was useful in the flat.” She fell silent, then added: “They are, of
course, happy that the flat is safe and sound, and that people
like us are looking after it.”

Annoyed, he replied: “Even so, isn’t it in our interest to be
here, out of harm’s way and close to the university hospital, in
case something happens?” She changed her mind and replied
while smiling: “Yes, you’re right, you’re right.”

He entered Yasmine’s son’s room and stopped in front of a
wall covered with pictures of the boy, from the day he was born
until the age of three. There were pictures of him crying while
licking the baking tin of his birthday cake; with his forehead
covered in mud; of her hugging him when he was only a few weeks
old in front of the white lace-draped birdcage. Her hair came
down to her waist, cascading like that of American Indians.

Then he gasped as his attention was drawn by one of the
pictures. He paused for a while in front of it. Her tanned
complexion was revealed in an ankle-length sleeveless dress,
which also showed her cleavage. He examined her face; it
appeared sad, despite the yellow and red flower behind her ear.
She seemed lost; the picture showed her son holding onto her

Zojiti and the light bulb and the glasses of wine in the kitchen, and the cans of
water on the balcony.

“Do you think they were prepared when they left?” Moments later, he blamed himself
for thinking that all people need is food and drink.

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content with just looking; he opened cupboards and drawers. 
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Zojiti and the light bulb and the glasses of wine in the kitchen, and the cans of
water on the balcony.

“Do you think they were prepared when they left?”
scarf while running, as she tried to grab hold of him.

This is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen in my life; she's not as thin as I imagined. She really looks like a movie star. He could not stop himself from going through her things and examining them. He was like a thirsty man chasing a drop of water.

After a few days, he noticed that his preoccupation with her pictures and her virtual presence had a soothing effect while the war was raging outside. The quest for her secrets was the only thing that broke the monotony of the long tumultuous days.

His wife was absorbed in her search for baby clothes in all the suitcases and nylon bags, so that she could wash them and get them ready. When she noticed her husband sitting perplexed in front of the photo albums and the thick envelopes with papers, she just said: “Don’t forget to put everything back as you found it.”

He saw a picture of Yasmine as a child, wearing white underpants and sitting in a wooden chair beside fig trees. In another one, she was clad in a black university graduation gown; it was the only photograph where she was also wearing eye make-up, with her hair cut shoulder-length. And then there was the picture of her as a hippie, with flowers in her hair, heart drawings on her face, jumping high in the air.

He went through her letters, one of which was from her friend Nuha, who wrote:

“Dear Yasmine, I read your sentence which says: ‘Write to Zina, tell her to study hard so I can pass my exams.’ I couldn’t stop laughing; really, you’re so wicked.”

When he found a diary, his heart skipped a beat. Much to his disappointment, however, it was empty. Then he found another two diaries, in one of which she had written a single sentence: “Is it the multitude of diaries and my desire for writing that is stopping me from writing?”

He closed the diary and sighed with satisfaction. He wondered: “She’s beautiful on the inside, too; she’s intelligent,
with an unusual attitude.” Why hadn’t he met her or somebody like her? Instead, he had allowed his wife to choose and marry him. He should have known and met someone who hangs paintings like these on the walls – water colour in which the hues and translucence of the water and sky quicken one’s heart; someone who loves donkeys, and keeps a statue of a small donkey made out of white gysump; someone who keeps a picture of a Persian cat and writes this dedication underneath: “This is Silver, one who is beautiful of hair and heart”.

Who gave her this book, which had the following dedication: “To the one and only Yasmine”?

Then he got to her music collection. He started to look at the records, which ranged from Sayyid Darwish to Pink Floyd, from Abdul Muttafik to Vivaldi. He shook his head. “What strange moods she has.” Suddenly he stopped and thought: why did he assume this was her music collection? What about her husband? No, upon inspection of her husband’s papers and his engineering books scattered about, it did not seem that he had time to listen to music, never mind Arabic music. The only indication of ownership was the drawing of a jasmine flower on all the books. There was a book about the singer Asmahan, newspapers cuttings about her and a collection of poetry books by both foreign and Arab poets. Her touch was visible on everything in the house, like the bottles of coloured sand from Petra, pictures of donkeys (always newborn), wind chimes suspended from the balcony ceiling that produced soft sounds whenever there was a breeze. After going through her things, he suddenly felt tired and dozed off in the rocking chair.

Suddenly, he felt someone’s presence in the room and heard Yasmine talking to him; that must be the sound of her calm voice. He got up from the chair and started looking in the rooms when he found his wife asleep. He became annoyed; his quest had gone on for too long. Then, he woke from his sleep, and smiled as he realized that he had only been dreaming about Yasmine.
The fact of continuously thinking about Yasmine had him more tense and repressed. She did not know him, but he knew her. He knew her secrets; he had read the letters she had sent to her husband before they were married. He had touched her things, seen her perfume bottles (including the empty ones), her towels, clothes, the pressed coloured cotton in a glass jar. He had found the medicine she used for period pains. He knew every little detail about her. He saw the reflection in the mirror of himself hugging her white bathroom robe with the picture of a wild mushroom embroidered upon it. He truly knew her. He loved her.

At night, he slept close to her, in her bed, feeling her tossing and turning, sensing her "fear of the explosions", as she had put it in a letter she wrote to an American friend of hers before leaving, but never got the chance to post.

Should he get her address from Nawal and write to her? Should he wait for her? Or should he travel to London as soon as his wife gave birth? He sipped coffee from her cup while her yellow canary twittered. He got up, and extended his fingers towards the canary, asking it if Yasmine also played with him like this.

He watered her plants, secretly, as people in Beirut had stopped watering their plants. He stared at her pictures for such a long time that one night it was as if Yasmine was looking back at him.

The shelling had stopped for a week. He thanked God when his wife felt labour pains at dawn that morning. He left his wife at the hospital, and returned home, completely worn out. After opening the door, he saw her standing in front of him. He saw suitcases and a coat. Before he could ask what was going on, there she was in front of him, with those large hazel eyes raised like a cat’s, the high forehead, fine nose and full lips. She held out her hand, smiling, and said: “Mr...?”

He did not embrace her. Instead, he found himself reaching for her hand, realizing that he did not know her.
Language Notes

1. مَشْكُوكُ (u), which is used here in the rare meaning of “stick together” (rather than the far more usual “to suspect”). This usage, though attested in CA, is more often used in the colloquial (LCA/SCA).

2. ستراي: dial. (<Fr. centrale), “the telephone exchange (office)”.

3. مَخْتَلُفُونَ (u) and مَخْتَلُفُ (pl.) : MSA مَخْتَلُفَةُ الزَّرْبَة (pl. مَخْتَلُفَةُ الزَّرْبَة). مَخْتَلُفُ (pl.) : MSA مَخْتَلُفَةُ الزَّرْبَة.

4. السَّحْب: type of palm tree with a wide trunk and short branches, which does not produce dates.

5. حَكَار: district in the north of Lebanon, with a large coastal plain and high mountains to the east. In 2003, Akkar became a province, with Halba its capital. It is famous for its many Roman and Arab archaeological sites.


7. “hey, you!”, “oil”! This form is a dialectal clipping of ولد and ولد (ultimately to ولد). These are normally used as a vocative for both genders and 2nd person sg. and pl. They are used to show contempt for the addressee. Similar forms are in use in Iraqi, for instance: ولد (masc. sg., pron. willch).


9. حَلْكَز: district in the north of Lebanon, with a large coastal plain and high mountains to the east. In 2003, Akkar became a province, with Halba its capital. It is famous for its many Roman and Arab archaeological sites.

10. اللُّك: “he, you!”, “oil”! This form is a dialectal clipping of ولد and ولد (ultimately to ولد). These are normally used as a vocative for both genders and 2nd person sg. and pl. They are used to show contempt for the addressee. Similar forms are in use in Iraqi, for instance: ولد (masc. sg., pron. willch).

11. اللُّك: “he, you!”, “oil”! This form is a dialectal clipping of ولد and ولد (ultimately to ولد). These are normally used as a vocative for both genders and 2nd person sg. and pl. They are used to show contempt for the addressee. Similar forms are in use in Iraqi, for instance: ولد (masc. sg., pron. willch).


15. مَلْكَ: dial. ; MSA مَعْقِدُ مَعْقِدُ (pl. مَعْقِدُ). مَعْقِدُ (pl. مَعْقِدُ). مَعْقِدُ (pl. مَعْقِدُ).


17. مَلْكَ: dial. ; MSA مَعْقِدُ مَعْقِدُ (pl. مَعْقِدُ). مَعْقِدُ (pl. مَعْقِدُ). مَعْقِدُ (pl. مَعْقِدُ).


Muḥammad Shukrī

Undoubtedly one of Morocco’s most famous, if not infamous, twentieth-century literary figures, Muḥammad Shukrī (Mohamed Shoukri) (1935–2003) was born into a very poor family in Bani Shakir, a small village in the north of Morocco. Soon after his birth, the family moved to Tangier, which would remain the novelist’s home for the rest of his life. Literature came late to Shukrī, who remained illiterate until his early twenties. The extreme hardships of his poverty-stricken childhood are depicted with chilling realism in his first book, al-ḥāsib al-ḥaṭī (Naked Bread), in which the reader accompanies the protagonist on his forays into crime, drug abuse and prostitution. Though written in the 1960s, its explicitness meant that that it would only be published in 1982 (in Lebanon), and it was another two decades before it became officially available in the author’s native land. However, the book already enjoyed fame in the West thanks to a translation in English by the American author (and fellow Tangier resident) Paul Bowles under the title For Bread Alone (1973), whereas another novelist and compatriot, Tahar Ben Jelloun published a French translation in 1981. Interestingly enough, Bowles’s translation was not based on the Standard Arabic of the original manuscript, as the translator was not familiar with it; instead, the source text was Shukrī’s “translation” of his book into the Moroccan dialect (in which Bowles was proficient). Subsequently, the book was translated into some ten languages. Later on, Shukrī released a second volume of autobiography, zaman al-ḥāṭī (The Time of Mistakes, 1992), which later appeared as al-ṣūf al-ḥāṭī (Streetwise, 2000). Shukrī made his publishing debut with a short story, al-ʿaṭr fī ʿl-ḥaṭī (Violence on the Beach), which appeared in 1966 in a Lebanese literary journal, yet it was not until 1979 that his first book appeared under his own name—a collection of short stories titled ḥanūn al-ẓurū (Crazy about Roses, 1979).

Thanks to Bowles’s translation, Shukrī’s fame spread within the Western literary establishment, many of whose more flamboyant members visited the author in Morocco. Some of these encounters, such as those with Bowles, Jean Genet and Tennessee Williams, were later immortalized by Shukrī in his books, Jean Genet in Tangier (1974), Paul Bowles in Tangier (1979) and Tennessee Williams in Tangier (1979) and Escalada (Paul Bowles, the Tangier Recluse, 1996).

Shukrī’s oeuvre also includes such novels as al-sūr al-dawālī (The Inner Market, 1985), ʿawāya al-ṣūf al-bāṭīn (The Seduction of the White Sparrow, 1998), and the collection of short stories from which the present story has been extracted, al-ḥaṣima (The Tent), which appeared in 1985 amidst the usual controversy and furore that accompanied many of Shukrī’s books.

In his work, Shukrī—who may be called a poet of the dispossessed—reveals a fascination with the underbelly of Moroccan society, the trials and tribulations of which he describes graphically, with great poetic force and compassion, devoid of voyeurism.

The following story is by no means an exception, as we follow the nocturnal peregrinations of a young prostitute grappling with life’s deceptions.
The Night and the Sea

She began to feel as if the beach was hers alone. In the distance, an old man dressed in rags limped along, throwing pieces of bread to the seagulls. She stopped and looked at the small beach huts, most of them without doors. All the bars were closed. The little old man was leaving the beach, tossing the last crumbs from his basket to the small flock trailing in his wake, his bald head tilted to the left due to disability. Some of the birds still followed him.

She took off her shoes and flung them onto the sand together with her bag. It began to rain. It was a warm rain. The raindrops soaked her hair. She let the waves lap at her feet, raised her head and closed her eyes. The raindrops trickled down into her open mouth. She loved doing that in the shower as well.

She picked up her shoes and bag and continued walking barefoot, contemplating the footprints she left behind. She grew increasingly sad without, however, knowing why. She crossed a small puddle along the long path leading across the beach.

She entered the Atlas Bar, ordered a Bloody Mary and then headed for the toilets to dry her hair. In the corner of the bar a young man and his girlfriend were seated. The woman was sobbing as her boyfriend tried to reassure her, swearing blindly that “Nadia” was just a colleague from work.

“So much rain these days!” said a foreigner to his friend, the English bar owner, who replied: “It’s the year of the floods in Morocco.”

Widad sat on a bench and looked at the two of them without understanding a single word. She caught the eye of the foreigner, and they both smiled.

The young man put a coin in the jukebox. His girlfriend stopped crying and smiled. He caressed her hair and face, and cupped her hand in his. A record began to play:
"Oh God, please don’t make her suffer for my wrongdoings..."

Suddenly, the door was flung open and Zubaida walked in, drunk. Tall, with bulging eyes, she had the kind of body that was always ready to pleasure a battalion of soldiers returning victorious from war. She exchanged kisses with Widad. The barman placed a glass of wine and a sugar bowl in front of Zubaida. She scooped a spoonful of sugar in her glass and stirred it in. Widad thought to herself that Nabil had a similar habit of putting salt in his beer to slow down the effects of the alcohol.

Zubaida said to Widad: “I haven’t slept for more than two or three hours over the last three days.” She slipped off her shoes and stood barefoot. “I feel sick. My head’s spinning like a top.”

Widad’s words froze in her throat as she thought of the men she had slept with and whom she didn’t love.

She turned to look at the sea. The horizon was cloaked in mist. Night was falling. Rain buffeted the windowpanes. The bar owner and his friend were chatting. A thought like a perfumed flower blossomed in Widad’s mind, racked with sorrow about the things she had never had. She couldn’t stand an empty glass, and beckoned the barman to top it up. Lightning flashed, followed by crashing thunder. Zubaida trembled. She exchanged an enigmatic glance with Widad. Outside, the sea and the sky were raging.

“I can’t stand thunder,” said Zubaida.

Suddenly a white cat appeared in the room. It sidled up to Zubaida, looking up at her affectionately, meowing. Zubaida looked at it, horrified.

“Do you like it?” she asked Widad.

Widad answered, surprised: “It’s only a cat.”

“Not every cat is just a cat. One day, my mother was cleaning a fish and a cat came and meowed innocently around her. When she tried to shoo it away, the cat attacked her, sinking its teeth and claws in her hand. Two days later, the cat returned to
the house. My mother found a pretext to punish the animal by locking it in a small room. After a few days, we opened the door and found a ghostlike creature that could barely move, let alone walk. Its eyes were filled with madness. It was a terrifying sight.

“I told my mother: ‘We’re going to feed her and give her some water.’ She shouted: ‘No, you won’t! It will die of hunger. It’s possessed by Satan and you have to kill it! Take the animal far away from here, to a place where there’s no food.’

“My little brother Mustafa and I put the cat into a basket and took it to a remote, desolate place, and we left her there. I asked my brother to wait with the cat until my return. When he asked me why, I told him that I was going to find the animal something to eat and some water so that it could survive. He said: ‘I’ll tell Mummy!’

“We left the animal and went back home. My little brother was skipping along and kicking empty cans; I, however, felt quite sad for the cat, which was about to die of hunger. That night, my mother felt the convulsions of the cat. The following morning, my brother and I collected some food and drink and went in search of the cat to give it to her in case she was still alive. We couldn’t find her. I tried to convince my mother that somebody must have taken it home with them.

“She said: ‘Never! You must have freed her spirit into the ghost that was strangling me the whole night.’ For years afterwards, this incident continued to haunt my mother because she never rid herself from the cat’s ghost until the day she died.”

“And so you waited for the day to take revenge on cats for your mother?”

“Me? Never! Animals don’t give me any pleasure anymore.”

Zubeida asked the barman to fill up their glasses. Widad thought about Miloud al-Farsi’s cat. He was a bachelor who shared his own food with his beautiful cat, whom he bathed and who slept in his bed. When she grew old and sick and her
beautiful hair began to fall out, he filled the bath with water, grabbed her by the neck and held her down in the water until she died.

The song continued: "I was twenty years old when I wasted my time on silly things."

He took out his diary and wrote in it: "Hope is fate, assuming that there is good will. How many times have I embraced a man I hated, for the sake of a fickle woman we both loved."

He looked at Widad, lovingly. She asked: "What are you writing?"

"Thoughts and feelings. The night of people and my naked nights. Evil nights. Lonely nights. The nights of two beetles of the same species as I am who are fighting over a dead mouse. Magian nights. The Magians used to like melancholy nights."

He was sitting close to the window, looking at the stars and writing. Widad was in her nightdress and lay on the edge of the bed, her legs touching the floor. Suddenly he felt a slight irritation, and wrote: "It is man, not God, who causes pain. He doesn’t feel sad since He is omniscient. As for people, we are often in pain because we know so little."

He didn’t know anymore how to select his thoughts. He took a sip from his glass. Widad felt like an orphan in front him. He had his whole future ahead of him. He would finish his university studies and graduate as a philosophy teacher. He would have another woman, while she would continue to sleep with men she didn’t love.

It occurred to her to kick him out and never see him again in her flat. However, her heart began to throb. She changed her mind and looked at him, filled with love, while he was engrossed in writing down his feelings, many of which he did not understand.

Nabil was sitting on the sand as Widad went through her usual rituals to soothe her nerves, walking along the edge of the sea with the water flowing over her feet. Most of her vitality returned. He continued to record his feelings and thoughts in his book without looking up. He thought she was like a flower without a stem. Then he
wrote to himself: “A forest night with its owls, bats, crickets, frogs and foxes is better than a beach night. Here, everything is buried under the sand and there is no life beneath the waves.”

It seemed to them that the sea was split: the green is close, the blue farther away. The horizon forms a string of white flowers, screened by the mist.

He picked up a handful of sand. His eyes were in hers, gleaming with desire. He closed them. He felt her breath warming his face. The grip of his hand on the sand loosened. They hugged. Nakedness always made him yearn for her body.

She turned her gaze towards the faces arranged in a row along the length of the bar. A lone youth was talking to a red flower he held in his hand; the woman sitting opposite him looked on, as he sought her advice on what to say to the flower. Widad felt she was an object of desire to all of them. Samir looked at her, showing his jacket for sale. She imagined them taking turns raping her. The bar was filled with men. Five or six of the women were each drinking with more than one man. She drank her glass there, while other glasses were awaiting her somewhere else. Widad hated herself for being desired in this way. She was afraid that someone other than Nabil would love her. She reflected that in passion there was some love. Her punter was paying good money for her. He was an old married man who was kind to her. However, he did not show up tonight.

Nabil had written in his notebook: “I don’t understand Widad except if she is far away from me. I feel as connected to her as I do to my own life, while distance brings out the various dimensions of this connection; I can’t even enjoy music unless it comes to me in exquisite vibrations. The natural view appears more inspiring when it is enough for me to look into the abyss, while I am overcome with vertigo that fills my head with hallucinations that haunt me like they do those who are treated with electroshocks in mental hospitals. My true soul stops on the other bank, at the top of the lighthouse whose mad lights reveal what floats on the sea. I am fed up with those who are reasonable towards themselves, as well as with raving madmen.”
كانت ما زالت وحيدة عندما دخل زنيجي. كان جميلاً وأيقيناً، جلس مع النين إلى طاولة وأخذ يقص كيف أنقذ فتاة من الغرق في الشاطئ،
فجأة قال بصوت عال:
- إنني أكره الناس الذين لا يعترفون بالجمال.
- لا تستطيع وداد أن تمنع نفسها من النظر إليها. غمرها بعيني. تأكد.
فجأة، لنني لم أظرفي. لم أقم فقط مع زنيجي.
دخلت طفيلة مادة يدها في الفراش. أثارته لها وداد أن تقرب منها.

أمسكتها من يدها الممدودة:
- ما اسمك؟
- رحمة.
- وأين أمك؟
- تنتظرني في الخارج.
أعطتها قطعة نقدية وصرحتها بلطف.
رأت وداد بدأ يغلب خافت في مرح على كتفها. أعشت بها ترقص على ظهرها، إنه أول زنيجي يلقسها. نظرت إليه في غموض. أقسم لها عيناه فرحانة. خلص إليها أنها لن تستطيع أن تشعرها في شيء. كان هذا الشعور، أمام رجل يشتهبه دون رغبة منها واضحة، يشكل لديها ليل الأعماق. ظلت هادئة. ومشاعرها نحوه ضبابية. ضغط برأسه على ظهرها.
ثم قال:
- هل أنت سبيرة؟
نظرت إليه دون أن تقول بشيء، متأ民居. بدلاً لها كتفل لا يستطيع أي عقاب. قبلاً على خدتها. أنفسها الحارة المخمورة ممزوجة بعطر قوي، تخلت نفسها في أكثر الأماكن وحشية. قامت وخرجت. وسط نظارات السكارى المفترسة والزنيجي يتجهها في زهر.
Language Notes

1. حَانَة: sg. حَان or حَانة, lit. “a place where wine (حَمَّر) is sold”.

2. مِشْتَرٌ: this is a very uncommon word meaning “bathtub”.

3. حُمْلَة: dialectal expression (MCA, but also common in other colloquials, such as Iraqi); MSA: حافـ (fem. حافـة); pl. حافـة.


5. نَحْدُ: pl. نُدْ (money), pl. نُدْ (change, "change", "coins"). It is synonymous with قَطْعَة نَفْقُ (or قَطْعَة نَفْقُ). It is synonymous with قَطْعَة نَفْقُ or قَطْعَة نَفْقُ.

6. حَاكِي: the basic meaning of this word (indef. حَاكِ (حَاكِي), which has undergone metaphorical extension to mean “record player” (“phonograph”). The word جرَاموْطَفْ ("gramophone") is also commonly used.

7. سَكْرَان: سَكْرَان (pl. سَكْرَان). This is the common paradigm of words of this pattern (eg. سَكْرَان, f. سَكَّال, pl. سَكَّال – “lazy”). However, in MSA, there is an increasing trend towards a regular feminine, eg. سَكْرَان.

8. حَانة (see above); MSA. حَاكِي.

9. نَبَيْثُ: originally, this was a generic word for various intoxicating drinks, made from barley, honey, etc. which is indeed how it is still used today in Syria. In some countries (eg. Egypt), نَبَيْثُ came to be used to mean “wine”, alongside the more usual term حَمَّر.

10. محمد: mediaeval Arabic historians from the Maghrib and Muslim Spain used this term to refer to both the Normans and the Scandinavian Norsemen, both of whom regularly attempted incursions into western Muslim territories. In the East, however, the term denoted the Zoroastrians.

11. مِشْرَب: this word can either mean “drink” (cf. مِشْرَب, pl.
Idwār al-Kharrāṭ

One of Egypt’s most famous and influential authors, Idwār al-Kharrāṭ (Edwar Al-Karrat) was born into a Coptic family in Alexandria in 1926. Despite taking on the role of sole breadwinner after the death of his father, a small shopkeeper, al-Kharrāṭ nevertheless was able to finish his law studies at Alexandria University.

He began his working life as a journalist, followed by a stint in business before working as a translator and finally devoting all his time to literature, specializing in novels and short stories. Al-Kharrāṭ made his debut in 1959 with a collection of short stories entitled حيز الخلافة (High Walls). He was also politically involved, and during his student days he played an active part in the nationalist revolutionary movement (as a member of a far left-wing group), for which he was imprisoned for two years (1948–50).

After his first collection, which was published at the author’s expense, it took over a decade for al-Kharrāṭ to release his second book, another collection of short stories entitled ساعات الانتفاضات الكبيرة (Moments of Pride, 1972). Later he published انتقالات عشق والصباح (Suffocations of Passion and the Morning, 1979). At the same time, he concentrated on his translations (from both English and French) and criticism. It was not until 1979 that he published his first novel, the seminal راما والتين (Rama and

The Dragon, English trans. 2003), which met with great critical acclaim. Many of al-Kharrāṭ’s novels have been translated into English: يُرَأِىَاتِ السَّكْنَانِ (The City of Saffron, 1989), حُجَّاجاتٌ بَوَيُّلُو (Girls of Alexandria, 1998) and حُجُّاجاتٌ بَوَيُّلُو (Stones of Bobello, 2005).

Al-Kharrāṭ’s work is rich with Egyptian cultural, social and political references, as well as autobiographical elements (e.g. the fact that many of his protagonists are Copts), couched in finely crafted prose in which the author often subverts traditional grammatical conventions. His writing often bathes in an oneiric atmosphere. From his early work (which was marked by a conscious attempt to veer away from the realistic school that pervaded so much writing of the time) to the present day, al-Kharrāṭ has continued to remain in the vanguard of contemporary Egyptian and Arabic literature, forever blazing new paths.

The story included here is an excellent example of al-Kharrāṭ’s prose and the atmosphere he succeeds in conjuring up so wonderfully and eloquently. The occasion is the death of an iconic Egyptian actress whose name, however, we never learn, whereas the information provided about the mystery lady appears to be a composite of a number of idols of the Egyptian screen and stage. Above all, the story constitutes a journey on the part of the protagonist, to which the reader is party. It also contains some of al-Kharrāṭ’s other typical themes such as loneliness, estrangement and alienation, not only from the world around us, but also from loved ones.
"Masks are the temptations of truth."

That night, Opera Square looked magnificent.

The street lamps were aglow with white, radiant light, while the palm fronds rustled in the night breeze. The statue of Ibrahim Pasha was lit up, proudly showing off its bronze body.

I entered alone.

The marble staircase and the ancient iron gate glistened, while the red carpets muffled all sounds. I noticed that the lowest box, which directly looked out onto the stage, was still empty. My seat was comfortable and alluring. I leaned on the crimson-lined balcony railing, and said to myself: "Why aren’t they here yet? It is nearly the appointed time." Then it was as though I had completely forgotten about them.

The murmur of the voices, the movement of feet and the peaceful hubbub arose up to me from the hall, studded with turning lights. The red, plush velvet they lit up added to the impression of luxury. Then the three knocks came; the lights were dimmed, and the din and hum gradually died down.

A man went to the front of the stage, in front of the curtain, taking short, heavy steps. He had a stocky build and was holding a piece of paper in his hand. I heard my neighbour whisper in a clear voice: "Muhammad Bey Sabri, the director."

The opera director stopped in front of the microphone stand, near its large disc. It was only now that I wondered at his presence there. He said:

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is with much regret that I have to announce ... I have to say ... announce ... I have some very sad news ..."

The heavy gilt-embroidered curtain opened with a soft, audible metallic sound.

However, the stage was deserted. The set was that of a
traditional nineteenth-century European reception room; it appeared dreary, with faint lights.

At that moment, I saw them, all the actresses, who had lined up on the stage in a single row, with the actors behind them in a second row. The actresses’ stage clothes were thick and dignified, old-fashioned; they appeared to be brand new, as though they had never been worn before. The multicoloured satin – blue, green and purple, glistening, heavy, puffed up and riddled with pleats and embroidery – looked stiff. The men’s suits, on the other hand, had jackets, wide, flat collars that were tight around their necks and a multitude of buttons.

They were all silent, solemnly standing, motionless. An expectant silence descended upon the theatre.

A tall woman with powerful charisma emerged from the row of actresses. She moved towards the microphone. It was as though the director had disappeared, yet he had, in fact, only taken one step back.

It occurred to me that she had that aura associated with the glory of the theatre in the Twenties, when she was the pin-up of all the students who undid the reins of the horses of her royal carriage and pulled it with their arms tied, vying with one another to tug it from her house in Fouad Street to the theatre in Emad Ed-Din Street.

She was the Sarah Bernhardt of the East, the Small Eagle, Hamlet, Cleopatra, Shahraz-Durr, Desdemona, Bilqis, the Queen of Sheba, Juliet and Layla, Zubeida the Barmakid, Zizi Hanem and Layla Bint al-Fuqara’ all rolled into one – so many living façades, so many lives!

I stopped, alarmed. I had let out a scream without fully realizing what I was doing. Some people from below looked up at me. Two firemen who had been standing next to the stage proceeded towards me as though they were going to stop me from making any movement.

She paused for a moment. Then she said: “Ladies and gentlemen.”
كان صوتها يرتعش، مخالفاً بشحنة هزت القلوب، وكأنها أنضف شر
النار غير المرئي في جو القاعة كله.

ثم كأنها استعمقت نفسها المشتته بجهد جهيد، وهي تقول:
"سيداتي، ساديتي، إنه لحريني وأن أقف بين أيديكم على هذا الهيكل
المقدس، أن أعني إلزكم سقوط وردة المسرح البائعة، محمرة الفن الساطعة،
مثلما البارحة... الراهبة.

تكرّست صوتها مرة أخرى وهي تطق اسمها.
قالت كأنها تستعمق آخر ما في وسعها من تشدد:
"سقطت من بيننا منذ قليل، استدعين لها تطلس الأطباء، ورفعتنا أيدينا
إلى السماء. نقلناها فوراً في كتف الأطباء... لكن أمر الله نفذ... وفقناها.
يرحمها الله.

ثم أجهشت بالبكاء الصريح الذي كان له الآن صدى غريب في القاعة
البامطة.

كان القاعة قد شهدت، كأنما من غير وعي، عند سماع الاسم. الآن
هبت الناس واقفين، انفجر النشج وتبكي، وصرخات نسوية قصيرة ناقية،
أضبت الأورار كاملة وانفتحت كل أبواب الخروج.

نظرت عرضياً إلى جانب الكواليس القريب منها، الأعمدة الرومانية
المتقة الصعوب معومة من الحنبك الخفيف، أقواس النصر عتيبة الحجر، من
الأبلاكاش 16، فاطات هائلة خضراء خفيفة للمعان، من الكرتون، غابات
السر والبلوط 17 شاسعة حتى الأفق البعيد الذي تتعرق فيه شمس متوهجة
الحمراء على لوحة مترية، كراسي لويس الرابع عشر مكعبة فوق بعضها
بعضًا، الموائد الرخامية السوداء، أسوار اليوس الريفية من الشعر القصير،
المجذود تحيط بجناين موثقة بإنشابين والبناء، الجبّيات المتعددة في
ساحات الكؤوس القوطية، الكورني 18 على الزخرفة الصغرى أمام الزهوة
الفلاحي، المآذن الساحقة وجداران الجوامع المخططة بالأصفر والبيج التال،
السلام السلامة العربية الدورات تصدر إلى طرفات داخلية مسورة
بحديد مشغول ترمي عليه خصل الزهور، فناء محطة مصر، وتماثيل عريضة
ملقة على وجهها مكسورة الأذن، المنصات والبراتيكابلات الحشبية،
فوانيس الغاز ضعيفة أيامنا في شوارع مبللة بالطرق، بكرات ضخمة من حلب
منورة الفناء وسلام لم نغليها محاذاة وكمالات متدلية وسميكة منفردة بال監
والأمور الصفراء ت'étخال بين هذه الركاب، تخضر وتتصاحب بضعف من
جدية في مرات ضيقة. يهبط الهواء فجأة على الفضيحة الرسوم وأورق
المقوّى فتهيّر الأعمدة والبابيات بهجتا ويتفرّق نسجها. صعدت
إلى راية برتب الكوابل.

وهي، ومدتها، وافية هناك.
كانت تتحدث إلى، وكانها لا تراني.
أعرف أنها مشغولة، وأن حبي لا يموت.
لم يكن أحد يراه هنا. لم يسمع أحد صرختي. هل ناديتها؟
وكأنما أرسح على شفتها ظل إمساح.
وعرفت أنها تكلم لاممًا غنيمة لا برن منه. لا نفسها، بل لي. وربما لانا كنا.
قلت: ما الذي يدعو إليك هذا الإله؟
قلت: لا شيء. ربما نزعة حارقة، هكذا، إلى أن أقول.
قلت: لماذا الإله؟
قلت: أزمة معقودة في النفس. ترضي. الكبيرة تحول بينها ويحيى، هل
لأن حريتي الوحيدة هذا؟
قلت: أما من خلاف آخر؟
قلت: اعتنّا كامل للوصول.
قلت: أتمح أن ينمو بالواحد كل هذا التقل؟
قلت: هذه ساحة محشّاة. ليس فيها أحد.
قلت: ولا موكب المحتفزين. ولا المريحات الثلاث؟

with wide banisters rising towards balconies, their ironwork
railings inlaid with bunches of flowers; the square in front
of Cairo Central Station; ancient statues with broken noses;
wooden platforms and estrades; gas lanterns perpetually lit in
streets glistening with rain; large pulleys with thickly knotted
ropes; towering stepladders; and thick, dangerously dangling
cables. All this paraphernalia was dimly lit by yellow lights,
which went out and then faintly appeared again in the narrow
passageways. The wind suddenly rushed along the painted cloth
and cardboard, gently shaking the pillars, forests and edifices,
softly stirring the fabric. The smell of the dust in the wings rose
to my nostrils.

She was standing there, alone.
She was staring at me, as though she did not see me.
I knew she was dead, and that my love would not die.
There was nobody who saw her there, nobody who heard my
cries. Did I call her?
It was as though the shadow of a smile was engraved on her
lips. I knew that she would be in great pain, not of her doing
and not for herself, but for me, or perhaps for all of us.
I said: “What caused you this pain?”
She said: “Nothing, perhaps a burning desire, just like that.

Until I say so.”
I said: “Why the pain?”
She said: “An unresolved crisis in the soul has consumed me
with grief and sorrow … pride stood between the two of us – is
it because I was only free here?”
I said: “Is there no other salvation …?”
She said: “To refrain completely from seeing each other.”
I said: “Should anyone be required to carry this heavy
burden?”
She said: “This is a deserted place. There is no one here.”
I said: “Neither a procession of celebrants, nor three
Maries?”
She said: “And torturing soldiers with swords or spears.”
I said: “This is not because of you, but because of them.”
She said: “They’re not there.” Then she said: “Also because of you. Did you know this?
I said: “This burden I carry inside of me is deep-rooted, as am I. Is there no path to take?”
She said: “It is as if I haven’t spoken. Nobody’s heard me. It’s as if everything I’ve done doesn’t exist.” Then she said:
“They don’t want what I give them. I give them my desires, my exclamations of joy, my cries of love and torments, and fragments of the soul. Nobody pays attention to me. They don’t want to... they don’t want to.”
I then said: “One is the same as all. I, for one, hear you, my love. Me, I want you. Even if there’s only one.”
She said: “Still, the plain of Golgotha is deserted. Lonely.”
I said: “Masks are the temptations of truth.”
She said: “My tears are for you; you who don’t see.”
I said to myself: “The light is totally dark. Of course. What were you waiting for?”
She told me: “My mother’s village in Sharqiyya province was razed to the ground, as if it was a dark ominous cloud heavy with harmful rain. When it actually rained, its roads changed into deep rivulets of clay, the cattle leaving deep, successive grooves in the soaked soil. I would say to her: ‘You’ll get electricity from the dam, television, porno videos, chickens from the co-op and subsidised bread at 10 piastres.’”
She said: “Their lives revolved around the daily rituals: sleeping on the oven during winter, and on the bench perched against the outside wall in summer. Friday night was the time for lovemaking and recreation, whereas other nights were spent in the mercy of God. The rest of the time was spent chopping away at the soil with the hoe and plough; praying at the mosque; smoking the goza; chatting at the coffeehouse; and gossiping about whoever came and went; writing petitions
and anonymous complaints. The food consisted of *pitta* bread, fermented cheese and sow-thistle every day, added with meat for religious festivals. And then there were the visits to the shrines of saints for *baraka*, requests for intercession from Imam Shafi’i, Sayyida Zeinab and every member of the Batniyya court for the Prophet’s blessing, noughts and crosses and quarterstaff fencing, ancient rituals going back until the beginnings of time, taken to heart without thinking, without formality.”

Then she said: “Daily ugliness is a mask; it’s deep and contains primal poetry.”

I said: “There is nothing that can forgive ugliness, illness and oppression – or poetry, for that matter.”

“What has happened to us, and to them? Egypt stinks with the rotting smell of oil and money from the Gulf, with that of our dead. Bring the shovel and the mattock. They fell victim to the attack of electronics. Yet, they continued to say: ‘God gives unto those who are calm, righteous and sound asleep, unaware of what is going on.’

The big projector emitted its glowing light, which was reflected on the stage and shone through the curtains of the wings, leaving wide, deep-black shadows on the ground resembling thick, iron bars. The bright ray of light blinded the view into the darkness of the wings.

The centre of the beam shone on her.

She appeared small but tender-skinned, her plump, liquid limbs in the middle of the stage, her face radiant with bliss. Her voice and gestures revealed this freedom, this flaunting, the fact that she’d given herself to the audience, voluntarily and unstintingly.

It was as though she had originally not put on those clothes that skilfully and deceitfully hung from her moving body, which made it seem as though she was returning to original innocence and no longer needed covering or nakedness like the wild bodies that looked around to ambush her, true to their nature.
I asked: “Which is one of them is a mask? ... Is not the truth hidden behind a mask? What does the mirror say?”

Who said that whatever comes out of a deep-rooted natural disposition is nothing but a mask? Who said that she would not go, here and there, or anywhere her passion took her?

She told me: “He wanted me to belong to him, in the bedroom, as I belonged to all of you on the stage. That was impossible, entirely. What could I do?”

I asked her: “Who are you?”

He was waiting for her by the door, pale-faced, angry. He had a chiselled jaw and a thick, Stalin-like moustache. She began to run towards him from the door. He was waiting for her, a grim look on his face. They both got into an old Volkswagen with a broken bumper. The car disappeared around the corner of Abu’l-Ala Bridge.

All that remained was complete emptiness. The dream had suddenly left me. There was nothing left, not even a single image. Yet, a strange feeling emanated from the darkness.

قالت: أيهما القناع؟
قلت: أليس الحق كامناً في القناع؟ ماذا تقول المرأة؟ من يقول إن هذه التي تنطلق عن سحية عميقة فيها ليست إلا قناعاً؟ من يقول إنها لا تمثي، هنا والآن، حقاً، على أنها هواها.
قالت لي: كان يريد أن تكون له، في غرفة النوم، كما أنا، لكم جميعاً، على خشيته المسرح. ذلك مستحيل. تماماً. ماذا باستطاعتي أن أفعل؟
قلت لها: من أنت؟ كان ينظرها على الباب، شاحب الوجه، غضبناً، له فاك مضلع وشارب كنيف على طريقة ستالين. وانطلقت تجري إليه من على الباب، كان ينظر إليها بعبوس، دخل معها العربية الفولكلو Waltz القديمة ذات الرفرف المكسور. مضت السيارة إلى ناحية كويتي أبو العلا. كان الأخواء كاملاً. الحلم قد أفرغ فجأة من كل محتواه، ليس فيه ولا صورة واحدة. بل ظلام يهب فيه هوواء غريب.
Language Notes

1. عَلَى: ECA; a contracted form of the preposition عَلَى.

2. مَرْكَز التَّقْتِافِيَ السَّوْمَرِيّ: “The National Cultural Centre”). The old Opera House was built by إسماعيل باشا, who also hired Giuseppe Verdi to write an opera – Aida – to inaugurate the building.

3. إبراهيم باشا: Ibrahim Pasha (1789–1848), the son of the founder of modern Egypt, محمد علي (Muḥammad ‘Ali, d. 1849), took over from his father when the latter, after a reign that lasted for half a century, became medically unfit to rule. Unfortunately, Ibrahim died a few months into his own reign. He was succeeded by one of Muhammad ‘Ali’s grandsons, ‘Abbās Hilmi (1813–54). The equestrian statue of Ibrahim Pasha at Opera Square was erected in 1872 and is the work of the French sculptor Charles-Henri-Joseph Cordier.

4. بِكّ: (ECA) despite its spelling in Arabic, this word is commonly pronounced بِكّ (the colloquial pronunciation being reflected in the alternative spelling بِكّ). Originally a Turkish honorary title for high-ranking officials, today it is often used in Egypt as a term of address indicating respect, flattery or sarcasm. In other countries (e.g. Syria, Lebanon and Iraq), the form بِك is the most common form.

5. المِكْرُوفُونَ: MSA (ECA); it is used here in the sense of “fluffed out” (المِكْرُوفُونَ (النَّفْضَةْ); the MSA denotes “puffed up”, “ruffled (feathers, hair)”.

6. (pl. خُطْبِيْر) a horse-drawn cab, also referred to as a calèche.

8. عماد الدَّين: a major thoroughfare, which runs from 26th of July Street to Bab El Hadid Square (near Cairo’s Central Station). It was famous for its cabarets.

9. السَّرُّ الصَّغرُ: lit. “the little eagle”. A reference to the play L’Aiglon (1905) by the French author Edmond Rostan, and translated into Arabic by السُّيد قَدْرُي وُرَزَجُ (1908–96). It was also one of the first successes of the Egyptian actress فاطمة زَمَدِي (1908–96). In it, she played the same part that Sarah Bernhardt had made her own on the Paris stage, which earned her the sobriquet “the Egyptian Sarah Bernhardt”.

10. مَلَّحِرَة الدُّرَّ: the only female sultan of Egypt (May–July 1250). Renowned for her beauty, Shajrat ad-Durr (d. 1259) was a Circassian (or Turkoman) slave purchased by Sultan صلاح الْبُرَّوِّ: she gained mythical status through her organization of the Egyptian army to deter the invading French troops led by Louis IX (Saint-Louis) while she acted as regent in the absence of the sultan. Her remains are kept in the mosque that bears her name.

11. بلْقِيْسٌ: this is the name by which the Queen of Sheba (of Biblical fame) is usually known in the Arab tradition.

12. لَلْقُمْرِي: the female protagonist in the legendary ill-fated love affair with the pre-Islamic (Jāhilīyya) poet قِبْس بن النَّمَوْنَ, also known as مَجْحُونَ ("mad"). The story goes that Qays and Layla fell madly in love with one another, but could not marry as her father had promised her to another man. Upon hearing this news, Qays lost his mind, and began to wander the desert, living among the animals. It is, allegedly, during his more lucid moments that he composed the verses that are some of the most famous love poetry in Arabic.

13. زِيَادَة الرَّمَعِيَة: a reference to the wife (and queen-consort) of the famous ‘Abbāsid caliph, هارُون الرشيد (d. 809). The adjective بِرامِكَة (Barmakids), a Persian family of ministers in the ‘Abbāsid caliphate (a dynasty that ruled from 750–1258 and takes
its name from its founder, the Prophet’s uncle.

14. famous Egyptian film (1945) directed by who also played one of the leads (alongside the hugely famous actress and singer to whom he was also married for a while).

15. (ECA) MSA: (pl. (Fr. plâcage);

16. (ECA) MSA: .

17. (ECA) MSA: (pl. (Tu. kópna);

18. (ECA) pl. of (Fr. praticable).

19. : according to the Gospels, the Three Maries (i.e. Holy Women) discovered Christ’s empty tomb after the Resurrection. Except for Mary Magdalene, the identities of the women have never been ascertained.

20. : reflects the usual colloquial pronunciation both in Egypt and in most other Arab countries; MSA (lit. “the small screen”), by contrast with the expression denoting possession: cf. e.g. “the one who wears glasses” (lit. “the father of glasses”).

21. (pl. or (pl. this word can also denote a type of ancient Egyptian stone tomb (mastaba).

22. : lit. “Friday night, the night of relief”. This highlights, of course, the special status Friday enjoys in Muslim culture.

23. : lit. “God grants relief”. This is an expression of reassurance, the implication being that God will make everything alright.

24. (ECA > Tu. arzahal); MSA: (pl. (Fr. кварц).

25. (ECA) bread made from sorghum (Fr. علقة).

26. (ECA) seasoned lumps of fermented cheese in a thick

27. liquid.

28. : sg. (lit. “birthplace” or “birthday”); in Egypt, it denotes a popular religious festival celebrated on the birthday of a religious figure, usually near the shrine or place with which that figure is associated. Cf. , the Prophet’s birthday.

29. : both (sg. قدیس and sg. (ونی) mean “saints”; the former refers to Christian saints, whereas the latter is reserved for Muslim saints.

30. : famous legist (d. 820), and founder of a religious “school” (madhhab).

31. : granddaughter of the Prophet Muḥammad and daughter of ‘Ali b. Abū Ṭālib (the fourth of the so-called ‘Rightly Guided’ caliphs). Sayyida Zeinab is the Patron Saint of Cairo. She has also given her name to a large working-class area (around the homonymous mosque).

32. : the name of a working-class district (between the Citadel and al-Azhar mosque), which used to be known as a centre for the hashish trade.

33. : this form reflects ECA pronunciation (and, indeed, that in many other dialects of the MSA نائم.

34. (ECA plural of (pl. (Ar. ودنة).
Salwā Bakr

Salwā Bakr (b. 1949) is one of the most distinguished female Egyptian authors and is known as a novelist, short-story writer and playwright. In 1972 she graduated from Ayn Shams University in Cairo, where she studied Economics and Business Management. Afterwards, she also studied for a degree in Theatre Criticism.

After working as a civil servant (1974–80), she became a respected film and theatre critic as well as working as a journalist. In 1985 she became a full-time author, and to date she has published seven collections of short stories, seven novels and a play. Her works have been translated into various languages. Among her short story collections are زیبات فی جنیة الزَّوَّاه (Zinat at the President’s Funeral, 1986); عَن الروح التي سُرقت (Of the Soul which is Gradually Stolen, 1989); and عَبَّجَين الفلاحَة (The Peasant Women’s Dough, 1992).

The major themes in Bakr’s work are her preoccupation with the plight of the poor and downtrodden in Egyptian society, especially women, who not only are subjected to social and political injustice but also suffer cruelty inflicted upon them by men. To endure this harsh world, women must be strong and learn to become survivors; by empowering themselves, they are able to subvert their men’s so-called strength and break the circle of dominance and subjugation. In many of Bakr’s stories, the male characters tend to be weak in comparison with the women.

Bakr’s most recent work is the novel سوقي الوقت (Waterwheels of Time, 2003), in which the author investigates the changes in an individual’s life as a result of political, social and economic changes.

In the following story, taken from the collection (2003) that bears the same name, the word شعر (“hair”) is used as a metaphor, with the hair connecting the two women at once inseparable and weak. The bond that exists between the two leading female characters is vividly described as being as strong as an umbilical cord, and yet as weak as a spider’s web.

On the surface, the story deals with the urban life of two women who seemingly lead a humdrum existence on the margins of the society, with very few distractions. In fact, they represent two different generations with different pasts, values and expectations. The older character is fulfilled, living in a past she cherishes, adamantly refusing a new life in the West with her sons. She is content with what she has, clinging to her heritage and past through her “ancestral” hair, photos and belongings. The younger woman, for her part, has no past to cherish or lean on. She lives with the uncertainties of life, burdened with the responsibilities of caring for a disabled child, in constant fear of the unknown.

The story is also about interpersonal relationships with others. While on the surface the reader observes a conventional, rather superficial relationship in which the two women seemingly only have the nargile in common, the story also addresses the issue of single mothers in Muslim society, complicated in this case by the fact that the child is disabled.

One may also adumbrate a contrast in language registers, with an elevated vocabulary and formal Arabic prose juxtaposed with colloquial Egyptian.
Ancestral Hair

Sometimes she seemed to me to be a weird genie who hung her braid from on high for me to climb to the summit of her tower. I then lost myself in her maze as though caught in the invisible thread of a spider’s web. What else could have tied me to this sixty-year-old woman with her six teeth? She could barely read a newspaper, and moved with the grace of a turtle. I sometimes blame time, that wretched thief that seizes the days of our lives and mercilessly denies us the opportunity to reflect upon ourselves, or others. Other times, I blame the savage geography of this ageing city we are destined to live in, for casting us onto one of its growing protruberances, like a fungus on its old, flabby body.

It occurred to me that what tied us together was my exclusion from society as a divorcée confined by a twenty-four-year-old son with Down’s Syndrome who had a wild body but the mind and innocence of a nine-year-old child.

As far as she was concerned, her vision became clearer with age. Her two sons had emigrated to the New World some time ago, and she had tried to give in to their wishes and live with them, but in the end she had preferred to return to her old world, to life in Cairo, and whatever was there.

I would always spend my free evenings with her. My mornings did not start until I crossed the ten steps separating her door from mine, so that I could ask her before leaving the building: “I am off to work now. Do you need anything?”

Was it perhaps the nargile that tied me to her? I had grown addicted to smoking it with her, despite the fact that I had never even smoked cigarettes before. We would place the nargile between us on our balcony at sunset, with the man-child sitting in front of us. We would exchange puffs, causing bubbles in the water that punctuated the topics of conversation, amputated
وكان غرضها الإعلان عن وجودنا كأحياء، فقط: «الرطوبة عالية من أول
صابراً»، "لخليل البواية مسحت منور العمارة بالليل". "حاسب! يا مدعو يا حبيبي الفحم بحرق يدك". لكي أقول إن النزلة لا تكفي
لتكون سبباً، ربما تكون مصاصة نوع من البأس، ولم ل؟! أنت أبدو كأرضية
تشاوذت السحاء، بينما سنوات عملني لم تزل تحرض نحو العبد،
أنت أمضي في الحياة، بهذا الابن العاهة، كطيب قص رثاء، فلا سبيل له
إلى الارتفاع والتحليق!؟! لا أثني ألف مرة أن يكون لي رجل آخر، بلتأ
من ذلك الذي وضع النير في رقبتي ومضى إلى أخرى منحته صبياناً وبناءً
جاؤوا إلى الدنيا بعقول تنمو وترزح عور الأيام كبيبة مخالق الله!؟ من
الرجل هذا الذي يرغبني بهذا التوه الضخم الراحي على عنقي، والمكلف
لخطواتي، والذي يدفعني يوماً بعد يوم بالانزواء والعزلة بعيداً عن الباس
والحياة فلا تخرج إلا لعملي فقط، ولا أعود لبيتي إلا لأحımı بسقفه هادئة
من الدنيا إلى ملكوتتي 10 الوحيد المتاب، حيث النزلة يسيء بها، والولد
أمامنا يرقبنا بنظارات ميتة كمحزح ضخم في سيرك، يتصنع الموت لبعث
الROWS على الشفاه.
ما أعرف عنها وتعرف عنى هو ضرب من التهويهات وهلالات غموض،
رغم سنوات جبرتنا المتعة، فقد كشفت لي عند بداية تعاون منذ سنوات
عن سيرة ذاتية خاذبة، لن يلحظها أحد، وستكون بدون ما مكن التوقف
عندها، حتى وجهها بما أظن كلما تأمله أنه مواتي ماما لسيرة من هذا النوع،
فالمرأة إذا ما تطلع إليه مرة، لن يعرف في الذكاء أيا من تفاصيله، لأنك بساطة
لن يحاول الالتفات متططعاً إليه مرة أخرى، باختناعاً ما يوجد به على أرضيف
هذه الذكاء.
However, I started to look at her in a different way ever since that day when I paid her an unexpected visit. I went to see her in the morning of one of my days off, while my son was asleep in bed like a beached whale. I wanted her to lend me some yarn:

"Have you got some green thread I could use to sew my olive-green skirt? It's torn along the side and I can't be bothered to go out and buy a whole skein for that!"

She replied, seemingly engrossed in something else: "Come here, and look in my sewing basket."

I said: "No, no ... I left the flat door wide open, and Mamdouh is inside, in bed. When you find it, bring it over, in your own time."

"Do come in for a moment!" she said, while beckoning me to follow her inside. Then she added: "Come in, take the basket and look for the thread in your own time."

I followed her into the only bedroom of her small flat, which was big enough for an old, lonely woman like her. She opened the wardrobe so as to give me the sewing basket, which was made out of wicker. She noticed my raised eyebrows as I stared at the enormous pile of hair on the white bedsheets, which was lit by the morning sun and revealed a tapestry of interwoven colours – black, purple and silver.

She sighed: "Look! I opened my pillow before I got the door. I thought I’d better air the stuffing at once in the sunlight, as the pillowcase is worn out and torn. I intend to make a new one."

I looked at the long, loose braids on her back, in amazement: "Oh ... the pillow is entirely filled with hair."

"Yes, my mother’s hair. It used to be her pillow. Each time she combed her hair with her ivory comb after her bath, she used to gather whatever hair had come out, and put it in a coarse cotton bag until it became a pillow. Look, this is the black hair from when she was young; that’s the red from the time she started to dye it with henna after she turned grey. When she grew older, she kept her hair in its original colour.

غير أنني في ذلك اليوم الذي دخلت عليها فيه فيجة، بدأت أراها عن نحو مختلف، فقد ذهبت إليها في صبيحة يوم إجازتي، بينما كان رجلي الطفل، يرقد على سريره كحول ميت دفعته الأمواج به إلى شاطئ من الشظيات. كنت أريد أن تعني خيطاً فسانتها:

- عندك 11 سنة إختي أخبت بها جوليني 11 النائبة 11 لأن جنبها انقع،
- قال في يد منجمة للوقية في أمر من الأمور:
- تعال، دوري في مرجأ الحية.
- قلت:
- لا، لا. أصول 10 تركت باب الشقة على آخره، ومدمر جبه على السرير، لما تلاقىها هاتيه لي على مهلك.
- الله تعالى في ملكة. قالت وهي تشير إلى أن أبعتها. ثم أضافت:
- تعال حدي المرجأ معك، ودوري على الحية في بها براحك. دخلت عارياً غرفة المنزل الوحيدة بالشقة الصغرى الواقية بالنسبة لمجرز وحيدة مثلمها، ففتحت الدواب تعنيم سلة الخف المصبوعة من الفش، وإذا لاحظت حاجي المرفوعين فوق عليّ المحذقين في كومة الشعر الهائلة فوق ملاحة السرير البضاء، فقد ناقشت عليها أشعة الشمس الصافية، فبدت خيوطها تشابكات من الأسود والأرجواني والضياء، قالت وهي تنهد:
- شوفي 10 ، فتحت مختغي قبل ما فتح لك الباب، وقفت أهوي الشعر بالرئة 10 وأحتله 17 في الشمس، أقبل كيسها قدم والانفقت. ناوية أعمال لها غيره جديد.

تسالت بدهشة، وأنا أتأمل ضعفتها الطويلة المنسدة على ظهرها:
- ياه. المخدة كلها شعراً.
- آه شعر ألم. المخدة كانت في الأصل مخدة، كل ما تتر جر شعرها بعد الحمام بالمشت سر الفيل 10، تلم النازل منه وحاصطة في كيس دوم 10، ما صار مخدة. شوف شعرها الأسود لما كانت شامعه والأحمر لما صارت تحته بحبة حمراء بعد ما شيب ططق فيه، فلما شافت تركته على لونه. كان
“She used to have a plait like silver thread. Unfortunately, when she died, I was in hospital. They stopped me from attending her funeral, as I'd just given birth and they said it would be bad for me, that I could lose the milk in my breasts. If I had been at her deathbed, I would have cut her braids and taken them. May God have mercy on her soul. Thank God, I have a bunch of her hair in the pillow. I also kept two molars and an incisor, which she took out before her death; I keep them in an old satin purse.”

“Ah ... two molars and an incisor. Oh, my word!” I exclaimed, as I grabbed the sewing basket and rushed back to my flat.

Was this incident a watershed in the way I viewed Mounira Fathi? I don’t know. All that happened afterwards is that I kept thinking about her, with the picture of the hair on her bedsheet imprinted in my mind. When I was back in my flat trying to thread the green yarn through the eye of the needle, my mind remained with her mother’s red, black and white hair glistening in the light.

I had mixed feelings towards her after that day. I no longer thought of her as an ordinary woman who goes unnoticed as a matter of course. In some way, she had become a mysterious old lady with peculiar idiosyncrasies. Since that day I started to think about her world, something I had not done before. Whenever I entered her flat after that, to smoke the narghile or drink coffee, I would pause to look at the many pictures that covered every wall of the flat. I soon discovered that she had not only hung her and her family’s pictures on the wall, but also that her family’s history was to be found in every corner of her flat.

The pictures were not of herself at all; each told a story about the life that this woman had once lived. Even her small kitchen had a picture of her mother and aunt on the wall above the old, round marbletop table in the corner. It showed her mother...
بعد الأم فيها منهمكة في تقطيع سمكة ضخمة بينما الحالة تمسك بذيلها في حمام. في كل مكان صور لأعمامها وأخوالها وأبناءها وزوجها الميت وأهله في البحر، في حديقة الحيوان، داخل مدرسة، عند الهرم؛ الصورة الوحيدة المخصصة، كانت لها وهي عروس على ما يبدو إذ ظهرت فيها شابة نشرت من الحرير الأبيض، تمسك بذيلها المروعة من فتحة ثوبها الواقعة.

جملها القصيرة المقتضبة، لم تعد عادية بالنسبة لي، إنها مثالاً فراغات عجزت الصور عن الإفساح عنها:

- الترجمة. بابا الله يرحمه، كان مراهج يدخنها بعد الفقهولة؟، تصدقني أول مرة دخنتها كان معه! كنت أحس منها نفسي أو تفسين في الأولى، حتى أتأكد أنها سالكة. كان الشمبال، أيه؟، نشرته، وهو نشيف ونلبه ونفقه في الماء، وآمي كانت تقضه وتوعمه. يباي يسحب منه على الجاهر. إنها لا تحدث عن عن وليدها إلا عبرًا، للكتال من حكايتها عن يديها القديم، الذي تعيش فيه دوماً، وأبحث عن خلاله عن شيء، يُعيني آلام الروح وعذاباتها.

- جاب له، أنت البطل، إن جوابه، من سامي بابي الكبير قبل آذان الظهر، وأنا كنت مشغول بها في حيل التراب، من شيالة الكعك الفضية، كانت خالتي الله يرحمها وقدمتها لي يوم دُخلتي.

- فؤاد بابي كحلي بيننا، على أن رفقة عائلتها للمسرة لأن أمها أصلها من إيطاليا. لكن سمارتها طبق الأصل.

- يا بالحظ! أقول نفسي مرات، ما كل هذا الراز عن الدنيا والعالم، أنا.
hand, am consumed by fear a thousand times every day. I am so frightened I could scream sometimes. I am scared to lose my job and income (what would my son and I do for food?). I am afraid that the old building we live in could collapse suddenly, like so many these days (where would we live if it actually happened?). I am frightened that my life will continue unchanged, with no hope of finding a man to be at my side and share the trials of everyday life, or give me some joy now and then.

However, my greatest and deepest fear, one that increases by the day, is that I might wake up one morning and not find my only certainty in this world, that is, my old neighbour Mounira Fathi, the beacon of tranquility amidst my spiritual anxieties and the key to my life. I am scared she might suddenly die and leave me deprived of my daily dose of spiritual stimulation, which gives me hope to live the next day.

What is death? I often wondered about that when I was having thoughts like these while feeling lonely at night, observing my sleeping whale and his snorting that would go into a never-ending crescendo. I would ask myself: “Is death like an absence?” If so, of what? The absence of outward appearance, features and body, the absence of the spirit or the absence of a shared moment? I searched for the true definition of death. This remained my obsession for a long time. Whenever I got off work, I would play a game with the computer.

One day, after inputting some data, I asked about death and got astonishingly naive answers: the decomposition of the body and its passing away, the disappearance of a person, the cessation of heartbeats, the stopping of blood circulation, the end of brain function, etc.

However, does death not have two sides? On the one hand, there is the person who dies and, on the other, the person who is shocked by the death of the one who dies. How do we evaluate death from the point of view of one party and not the other? Hence what is the assessment of death from the standpoint of the other party?
I again put the question to the computer, with amazing results:

“The eye does not see. The ear does not hear. The mouth does not kiss. The hand does not touch…”

My dear neighbour’s answer was more accurate than that given by the computer, and with a speed I was not expecting at all. One day, she came to see me after midnight. She had been knocking on my door persistently. When I awoke from my sleep and opened it, thinking that a catastrophe had befallen my child, I found her standing in front of me, looking very faint. She said she felt very sick. I quickly drew her into my flat and made her lie down on my bed. I ran to the kitchen to get her some water, as she complained her mouth was dry. Soon after, I ran to the telephone and called a doctor from the nearest hospital. Then I rushed back to her and found her lying on the bed, motionless, with her head slumped on the edge of my pillow so that her braid was dangling on the floor – a silver braid that reflected the scarce light from the lamp that hung beside the bed.

I just stood there, nailed to the floor. I wanted to scream, but a reassuring feeling engulfed my soul and filled me with a calm I had not experienced before.

What I had dreaded so long came to pass, yet there I was – calm and reassured; I realised that life was possible. In the last moment I spent with my neighbour, there was no narghil between us, and no man-child sitting in front of us.

“Here is death, expressing a tangible definition, a tactile object; it is the regret for a past we do not wish to end,” I said to myself as I gazed at her wizened face, upon which death had drawn an eternal expression.

In spite of that, I felt regret, whereas her death caused an overwhelming sense of ambiguity and confusion; when I was confronted with her death, it struck me that it defied all definitions and understanding. I felt that I had been robbed of...
something, something dear and precious that had been wrested from me by force.

Dazed, I quietly went to my wardrobe and took out the scissors. I walked up to her and briefly stood there looking at her once more, before my hand grasped her thick soft braid and cut it resolutely. There were a few black hairs that had withstood the passage of time.

I headed towards the mirror and looked at myself as I placed the braid on my head, like a garland. My soul grew increasingly calm as I declared to myself a certain victory, while the shrill sound of the ambulance siren penetrated my ear.
Language Notes

1. شُعرَة: this word serves both as a little-used plural of شَعْرٌ, "hair" (though more commonly شَغْرٌ) and "feelings".

2. أُخْلَق: pl. or سُلُف < سُلَف (u), "to precede"). Note also the adverb سُلَفًا ("beforehand"); other words for "ancestors" include (pl. of آب, "father") and (pl. of جد, "grandfather").

3. جِنَّة: sg. of جِنَّات, "female jinn" (see امرأة وحيدة, note No 4).

4. خَلَلُ سُرْي: "umbilical cord" (cf. سُرَّة, "bellybutton"); خَلْل, "rope").

5. خَيْوَة: (nاسمية). Variants include: خَيْوَة العَتْكِبَة and خَيْوَة العَتْكِبَة. Note that نسيم also means "textile", "fabric" and "tissue" (biology). The spider's web has many religious connotations in Islam. It is said, for instance, that when the Prophet Muhammad fled with Abu Bakr (one of his companions) and hid in the cave of al-Harra, a spider built a web around the entrance to the cave so that the enemies of Islam would think the cave was inhabited. There is even a سَرْع (44) in the Qur'an that is named after the spider.

6. المدينة الشاحبة: lit. "aged city"; the connotation is clearly negative, with شأْخ being derived from the verb شأْخ (i) ("to age"). The use of this adjective in this context is rather unusual, as one would have expected قُدِّم or قُدِّم, which have a more neutral connotation, e.g. المدينة القديمة ("the old city") or المدينة العتيقة ("the ancient city").

7. الطفل المفعولي: lit. "mongoloid child" (originally a calque from the term formerly used in English).

8. أم الدنيا: lit. "the Mother of the World", an epithet usually used for Cairo (and attributed to the famous fourteenth-century Tunisian historian Ibn Khaldun [1332–82], who has been called "the father of modern sociology").

9. ECA and many other dialects; MSA "أنا خارجة ("I am going out"). The verb تُرْزَل (i) means "to descend" or "come down from stairs" but in many colloquials it means "to go out".

10. (ECA) fem. active participle (of عَازِر, "to be in need/want of"), which may stand alone or in nominal sentences (جَمْل إِسْمِيَة). It is the usual construction to express that one wants something (where MSA uses a verb like أَرَاذَل, "to want" or "to like"). e.g. عازِر كتاب ("I'd like/want a book"). It is inflected for gender and number: عازِر (f. عازِرة, عازِر) ; عازِر (m. عازِر, عازِر) ; عازِر (pl. عازِر), with the variant عازِر (m. عازِر, عازِر) ; عازِر (f. عازِرة, عازِر) ; عازِر (pl. ")

11. حاجة: though this word is also used in MSA in the sense of "need", its semantic field in ECA is much wider and, in fact, corresponds to MSA شيء ("something"): e.g. عازِر أي شيء ("Do you want anything?").

12. جَنْبَت: originally a Turkish word, the more common term in Egypt for the hookah or bubble-bubble is شيشة .

13. البارحة: "the day before yesterday" (ECA < CA "yesterday"), cf. MSA أَوْلَى أَمَسّ or أَوْلَى أَمَس. 

14. حاسب: ECA; MSA عندهم.

15. الإبن العاهدة: lit. "the disability child". In this context, the disabled child has become a disability to his mother.

16. مَلْكُ: "God's creatures"; خالق, "creation" is the pl. of مَلْكُ (الملوك), the passive participle of the verb خَلَق (الخُلُقات [u]), and thus lit. "the created".

17. "Cosmos", "universe"; unlike similar words such as الَّذِي or الَّذِي, this has a more mystical and religious connotation in that it denotes the hidden world of spirits and souls (cf. Qur. 23:88, 36:83).

18. عَنْتَاكَ؟: common across Arabic colloquials; MSA هل عندك؟. In spoken Arabic, the interrogative particle is normally deleted, its function supplanted by a rising intonation. Also note that in most dialects, the second-person sg. gender-marking final vowel (ة) is elided.
19. خَطَّة (pl. خَطَّات): ECA; MSA

20. جُنَّة (ECA (> It. gonnella, "skirt"). In Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, the commonly used word for a woman’s skirt is جُنَّة.

21. زَيْت (زَيْت): ECA; MSA (cf. زَيْت, "olive oil" (pl. زِيْتون) "olive-green").

22. كَسِيَّة: ECA; MSA (Kusiya).

23. "the fact is, because": ECA; MSA لَنْ أَيْ / لَا لَيْنِ (cf. لَيْنِ the fact is, "at home"). In the story, the protagonist does not live in a house, but in a flat (pl. شَقْقَة, شَقْقَة).

24. رَاحَة: ECA; MSA رَاحَة ("comfort", "rest").

25. شُوِّي: imperative (sg. fem.) of the verb شَوَّي (u), "to see", which is a common cross-dialectal equivalent of the MSA رَأَى.

26. البَلْدَة: ECA; MSA "in the village".

27. ضَمْتُ (u): ECA ("to put", "place"); MSA ضَمْتٌ "to put".

28. سَنْسَنْ الفيل: "elephant tusk"; here, it, of course, means "ivory".

29. دُموُر: a type of cheap, coarse cotton material traditionally used for upholstery.

30. سُلُوك: ECA; MSA سُلُوك. سُلُوك

31. "funeral procession": ECA; MSA جَنازة "funeral procession".

32. نَفَاض (pl. نَفَاضُ: a woman who has recently given birth (cf. نَفَاض, "childbirth").

33. ساعة طِلْوَع الْرُوح: lit. "the hour of the rising of the soul"; cf. ساعة الاحضار or ساعة الاحضار.

34. لَغْي: ملَغْي (lit. "one thousand mercies for her"). The word لَغْي (from لَغْي) is often used in Arabic for emphasis, e.g. لَغْي ـ شك ("a thousand thanks").

35. السَّاتَانَ: ECA ("satin"); MSA السَّاتَانَ.

36. "drinks" it (this is, of course, a reference to the fact that it is filled with water). Interestingly enough, this usage has also been extended to other things such as cigarettes; e.g. "دَخَنَ ("to smoke") is the usual verb, as it is in MSA "دَخَنَ ("to smoke") is the usual verb, as it is in MSA.

37. بُيوت (pl. بُيوت), can mean either "house" or "home" (e.g. في بُيوت, "at home"). In the story, the protagonist does not live in a house, but in a flat (pl. شَقْقَة, شَقْقَة).

38. "nap", "siesta" (also قال (i).)

39. يَمِين: ECA (Tu.); MSA يَمِين "right hand".

40. في تلك الأيام, في ذلك الأِيام: cf. أيامها.

41. عبر (u), "to pass by".

42. تَوْضَيْه: ECA; MSA تَوْضَيْه "to make ready", "prepare".

43. جَابَ لِي: ECA; MSA "he brought it to me".

44. ساعي البريد: ECA; MSA ساعي البريد.

45. جواب: ECA “letter” or “reply”(!); MSA, respectively. رسالة زُخُود (or جواب زُخُود).

46. "to dust", ECA; MSA "to dust".

47. يوم دُخْلي ("my wedding day"); MSA يوم زواجي (or يوم عرسني).
The narrator, who is also the protagonist of the story, adapts himself to hardship following the death of his father, with his mother and three sisters forced to eke out a meagre existence on the father's paltry pension. This reversal of fortune forces the family to move to a smaller house, while at the same time shattering any dreams of his obtaining a university education.

The death of the narrator's father has not only made him the family's sole breadwinner but, as the only male in the family, also the guardian of its moral reputation. He is, however, abruptly awakened from his usual lethargic state by a chance encounter with a childhood sweetheart, who has climbed the social ladder by marrying the head of the company he works for. Throughout, the narrator's state is one of fecklessness: too weak and self-pitying to make decisions of his own, he allows himself simply to be carried with the tide, which presents the least effort.

Fu’ād al-Takarlī

Fu’ād al-Takarlī was born in 1927 in the Bab al-Sheikh area in the heart of Baghdad. He graduated from law school at the University of Baghdad in 1949, and began working for the Ministry of Justice. He became a judge in 1956, before being appointed head of the Court of Appeals in Baghdad. In 1963 he went to Paris to study law for two years, after which he returned to his native Iraq.

In 1983 he resigned from his post to devote himself full-time to his writing. Although he had begun writing short stories in 1947 and published a few of them in 1955 in the Beirut-based literary journal, الأدب الرجوع البعيد (The Other Face), saw the light only in 1960. His first novel, خاتم الرمل (The Long Way Back), was published in Beirut in 1980, and has been translated into French and English (2001). His other novels include خاتم الرمل (The Seal of Sand, 1995) and المسارات والأوجاع (Joys and Heartaches, 1998). In 1990, al-Takarlī took up residence in Tunis, which would remain his home until 2003, when he moved to Syria. Two years later, he went to Amman, where he passed away in February 2008.

The following story is excerpted from his collection خُطُوُ مَا تِلْمُرُّ (Tales from the Invisible World), and focuses on the way people deal with change, on the fine line between being content with one's circumstances and submitting to them.
A Hidden Treasure

Inside some people – not everyone – there is a store of contentment and satisfaction which can overflow and, in time, make the pressures and bitterness of life bearable. This abundance of contentment transforms the curse of poverty into an acceptable situation, and deprivation into something that can be changed or forgotten.

When my father was still alive, my mother, sisters and I used to have a modest lifestyle: we were well fed and adequately clothed. We were descendants of what could be called a noble and respectable family, which had more than once witnessed reversals of fortune. As a result, it had gradually lost its wealth and social status. My father grew old, and we had to make do with his small pension.

I and my three younger sisters were born to my father and his second wife – my mother – when he was in his fifties, which was something he neither wished for himself nor for his wife or children. However, it is impossible to predict when children will be born in a marriage, and it was only after ten years that the Almighty had mercy on my parents and they had us. On the one hand, we were a comfort to them in their loneliness, but, on the other, we added to their financial burden.

My three sisters and I never felt the pressures of hardship, except when my father passed away after succumbing to an illness he could not ward off for long. I was only sixteen at the time, and for reasons unknown to us, our world was shattered and destiny treated us harshly.

I was in my third year of secondary school, eagerly awaiting the day I would complete my university studies. However, I was not determined enough, nor was I able to resist the distractions that surrounded me. When the landlord of our house in Ra’s al-Chol on the outskirts of the Bab El-Sheikh quarter came to ask...
us to pay him the two months' rent we owed him, I was unable even to apologise to him in an appropriate manner, and for some reason I did not react to the rough and rude way he spoke to me. My eyes were filled with tears when I told my mother what had happened, and how that lowlife landlord had shown no respect for my father’s memory or our family’s reputation.

She embraced me tenderly, and said: “May God forgive him! You’re right, my son, your family is honourable ... your family may not have a lot of money ... that’s not right, and no one should be expected to bear this. Come on, let’s get our act together.”

We did indeed organize our affairs by moving into a smaller and cheaper house, while I quit my studies when my uncle found me an apprenticeship at a technical college to study petrochemical engineering in oil refineries. I was able to earn money during my studies.

My illiterate but commonsensical mother did not remember the glory days she had experienced with my father, nor did she much regret what we had lost; instead, she lovingly and naturally focused her attention on what we had now, being her daughters and a son who was earning an honest living.

She possessed this rare store of contentment and satisfaction. She celebrated my first wages when I was still in my mid- to late teens. She gathered us in the evening around a small table, on which she had placed a nice cake with one candle. She switched off the light and addressed us all: “Look at yourselves! Look how beautiful you are! Such lovely fresh young faces! Let's forget everything and celebrate what we have - our health and good looks!”

It was a wonderful evening; my sisters and I would remember it for the rest of our lives. After that, we just had to accept whatever hardships, joys and troubles came our way. I did not graduate easily from the Institute of Petrochemical Engineering, and I resigned myself to the fact that I had to repeat the year.
My mother had little doubt that there was great benefit to be had from repeating a year.

When I graduated I got a job straightaway in one of the oil refineries not far from Baghdad. Our circumstances improved, both materially and psychologically, and we were the envy of many people. We did not move from our modest house, nor did we accept handouts from anyone. The passing of time did not affect family harmony or our close bond with a woman who overwhelmed us with love and understanding. I did not envy my sisters when they continued their studies. Quite the contrary, I was happy for them. I was twenty-five years old when one of my sisters married. Although at the time I did not think about marriage, I did discuss the idea quietly with my mother, reaching the happy and optimistic conclusion that it was not too late for me.

After the revolution, I was put in charge of managing the service department at the Doura oil facility. Although my salary increased, my ambitions did not. I had the same kind of feelings of contentment my mother had, and I felt comfortable. I was not philosophical about life. I thought that life, or rather the material possessions it offered, did not force people to pursue them, nor did it tempt them to do so; the fact of the matter is that people instil in themselves a desire and love of ownership and control, committing crimes under the guise of legitimate ambition. I discussed this with my mother, who as I have said was illiterate; she appreciated my way of thinking and realized its implications. She was so touched by it that she came over to kiss me, praying God to keep me in good health.

My mother and I lived by ourselves in our small house after my sisters got married, but we did not feel despondent as it was normal in our society for women to marry, live in their husbands’ houses and lead their own lives. That day was the start of autumn. I was twenty-eight years old. I was busy at work, not doing anything in particular, when Dr Ahmed...
Raghib, the general manager of the refinery laboratories, sent for me. I went to wash my hands and change my clothes for the meeting with him. I did not wonder about the reasons for this somewhat strange invitation; I was not particularly bothered. I sat waiting for a few minutes in the reception area and was then shown into his grand office. He was a forty-something, sullen, well-dressed man with a sharp eye.

He welcomed me, somewhat reservedly, and stood up to shake my hand: “Come in, Mr Abdul Rahman. Be seated.”

I had often heard about his integrity and managerial acumen. I speculated that, perhaps, he was going to ask me to move to a different plant. The matter did not concern me much. As it turned out, his request was far simpler than that. He knew about my practical experience repairing machines, and asked me to take a look at the oil heating system at his official residence before he started using it. It had been damaged the year before, and had not been repaired properly. He added that the house he lived in was owned by the state, and he feared that if he asked an ignorant worker to fix the system, he might do more harm than good. I concurred with his argument, and smiled. I asked him politely when he would like me to start. He told me he would like me to get on it straightaway, if possible. Then he called his secretary and asked her to tell his driver to take me to his house and bring me back afterwards.

The general manager’s house was not far from the plant; it only took ten minutes by car before the driver pointed to a grand, white house with two floors, which appeared at the end of a clean tarmac road. It was surrounded by extensive gardens, with green trees seemingly glinting under the September sun. My arrival had been announced. The gardener was waiting near the outside door, while the housemaid stood on the balcony facing the main entrance. The maid showed me to the boiler room at the back of the house. She was a polite young lady in clean clothes, well versed in the art of addressing the likes of me with contempt.

معامل التصفية، فذهبت أغسل يدي وأبدل ثيابي استعداداً لمقابلته، دون أن أسأل عن أسباب هذه الدعوة الغريبة بعض الغرابة. لم أكن قلقاً، هذا هو كل شيء. جلسنت متفائلًا في غرفة السكرتيرة دقائق قليلة، أدخلوني بعدها إلى مكتب الفخم. كان في حوالي الأربعين، جسم الطلعة، أنيق الملبس، حاد النظرات، تلقيني بترحيب متحفظ:

- فضّلك سيد عبد الرحمن، فضّلك أجلس.

ثم قام يضافحي.

كنت سمعت مراها عن استضاعته وصلاحيته الإداري، فخشيت أنه ربما يريد أن ينقلني إلى عمل آخر برضاي. لم يهمني الأمر كثيرًا إلا أن طلبه كان أسرع من ذلك. رجائي، بسبب ما يعرفه عن خبرتي العملية بالمكائن وتصليحاتها، أن أرجى نظرة على جهاز التدفئة النفطي في داره الحكومية قبل أن يبدأ بتشغيله، فقد أصابه عطب في السنة الماضية ولم يتم تصليحه كما يجب. ثم أضاف أن داره هذه من ممتلكات الدولة، وأنه يخشى أن يستقدم عاملًا جاهلاً يفسد الجهاز بدل أن يصلحه. أيدته في أفكاره مبتسماً وسألته بأدب مني ففضل أن أبدأ العمل فأجاب: حالي إن أمكن؛ ثم كمل السكرتيرة ورجاه أن تخبر ساقتي أن ينقلني إلى بيتهم ويعود بي بعد ذلك.

لم يكن مسكن السيد المدير العام بعيدًا عن العمل؛ إذ لم يمض إلا دقائق عشر حتى أشار السائق إلى دار فخمة، بضاء، بطابيع، لاحظنا في نهاية طريق مغير نظيف.

كان حافظة مبهجة وأعمة، بدأ في أشجاره الخضراء تلامع تحت شمس أبولو؛ وكانوا على علم بمجري، إذ رأيت البستان ينطوي قرب الباب الخارجي والخادمة واقفة في الصورة مقابل المدخل الرئيسي. دلتني على قسم من الجهاز نصب في الجهاء الخلفية من الدار. كانت شابة مؤدية بتهاب نظيفة، تنقّن الكلام باحتقار مع أمثالى.
I carefully examined the main boiler for a while and discovered that it had a simple fault because some ignoramus had tinkered with it. I had no trouble repairing it. As I wanted to examine the rest of the system inside the house, I called the housemaid and requested that she inform the lady of the house and take me inside. It only took me a few minutes, and I did not find anything wrong with the rest of the internal heating system. I thought it would be a good idea to switch on the entire system and verify that it worked properly, and told the housemaid of my intention so that she could carry the message to the lady of the house. She hesitated for a moment, then asked me to wait outside on the balcony while she informed her mistress. My hands were grimy from the black grease of the boiler, so I started to wipe them with a paper tissue. As I stood waiting on the balcony, I looked at the vast garden extending seemingly endlessly, its tall, swaying trees screening the horizon. I heard a familiar, warm voice before I could turn around.

"Excuse me, is there really a need for ..."

She stood in the doorway, looking radiant in a light-blue outfit. She looked at me as I turned towards her.

"Oh ... Abdul Rahman! Mr Abdul Rahman? Is that you?"

She raised her heavily beringed hand in front of her mouth.

Throughout my life, I've always believed that calm is never followed by a storm, and that it is possible to leave the past behind and to live a slow and easy life until the end. I was not ready to change my mind about this, but my mother disagreed.

She said: "How could you forget Khadija? It wasn't so long ago that she left us all of a sudden! But ... how silly of me! It's been ten years ... no ... it must be twelve, or perhaps more. Oh, God! It's as if it's been only hours! Did you say that she is very keen to see me?"

I shook my head.

*Now and then, she used to come to our house, accompanying her mother; she was thirteen years old then ... a striking-looking girl with...*
black eyes, black hair and a pale white complexion. Her mother used to leave her with us. I never knew why. She used to help my mother and sisters with the household chores. Khadija openly showed her fondness for me, never refused me anything and was always eager to please me. I, on the other hand, was at that wild age of fourteen, reserved, shy and too proud to pay any attention to young girls. Khadija would throw dazzling glances at me, her rosy cheeks blushing whenever I talked to her or asked her for something.

My mother added: "How can you ask who she was? But ... don't you know? She's the daughter of Ali Asghar, a sergeant-major in your uncle's outfit and his aide. Her poor mother was very fond of me, and used to come and visit us and leave Khadija with us so that she could help me out around the house and play with the girls until her mother finished the housework at your uncle's house. How destiny can change things! Did you say that she's the wife of your managing director? Talk about a reversal of fortune!"

Afterwards, I needed to restore the hidden balance of the simple and unexciting life I had always wanted. Unfortunately, the memories would not allow me to do so.

We were free as birds that summer holiday. My sisters, Khadija and I fooled around and played in our large house to our hearts' content, with the innocence of childhood. The game we used to play most was hide-and-seek. It was an exciting game, full of cunning, and we preferred it to all others. As we played it so often, it happened once that Khadija and I were hiding in a dark corner behind a pile of bedding in one of the rooms. We were wedged together next to the wall, bunching in fear of being spotted by my youngest sister, when I suddenly felt the combined heat of our young bodies. Next to her, I felt my shoulder brushing up against her heaving bosom. Her shining eyes radiated with delight, framed by the black hair that cascaded around them. I was shaking, subconsciously wanting to move closer to her and put my arms around her. I felt deliciously dizzy and drew her close to my chest; I started pressing myself strongly against her, feeling the curves of her body while she gave herself over to me.
Memories do not vanish from a person’s mind for no reason. Indeed, they can be a source of misery if one is not careful.

I was in the middle of something, concentrating on my work, when I was once again summoned by the general manager.

"Thank you so much, Mr Abdul Rahman. We turned on the heating yesterday, and it’s working fine. Of course, this is all thanks to you." All the while, he was busy opening his desk drawer, and never looked up at me. "Were you and my wife neighbours some years ago?"

I told him we had been, and he raised his head, holding a parcel in his hands. I didn’t like his look. He offered me the parcel: "This is a small gift as a token of my deep appreciation. I hope you’ll accept it from me as a sign of friendship."

I was embarrassed, and began to stammer. As he got up, he added: "Today you’ll be taken back to your house by my driver, so he learns where it is, as my wife would like to visit your mother tomorrow. That is, if it’s okay with you, of course!"

Afterwards, my mother gave me a full account of the visit: "She leaped at me and started to shower kisses on me, on my hands, cheeks, shoulder and hair. I was even afraid she might drop her young son she was holding in her arms. She’d called him Abdul Rahman, out of affection for you. Do you see?

"I was saddened by the difficult times they’d had, and the terrible hardships they’d endured after her father retired, and, later on, after his death in their Turkmen village near Kirkuk. She told me how her mother, may she rest in peace, wanted to return to Baghdad, to us ... However, she became disabled through illness.

"Finally, she got married five years ago. Now she’s settled here. She asked about anyone who was in some way connected with Bab El-Sheikh. She was on the verge of tears when she recounted that her heart had nearly stopped when she saw you in front of her, in worker’s overalls and your hands all grimey. She really is a genuine person! If only you could see how many presents she brought me and your sisters."

Fu’ad al-Takrali
لم أجد ما أعمله مع الذكريات التي أخذت تحلل، حيما، حللها، غير أن استعدها وأعيدها، لعل هذه الاستعدادات المتكررة تستهلكها وتزيل آثارها من منفسي. كانت أعلم ما أنذاك في الحادثة الصادقة، بما بيناهي الذكر من صلات ولدائها، فما إن وضعت شفتي على خذذها أقفاها بردا، حتى شعرت بذراعها ملأت بي وبشفتيها الحزينة نشفت في وتطييقان، كانت قيلة ناعمة مشعة رقيقة؛ أخذت بي وذهبني بما عبدًا عن العالم، ولم تتكشف وخرجنا، بعد كل ذكر، راكبين ناعمة الخشب، بضوضاء، مفتعلة، ولم تتفت صورة شفتيها الحمراء المنضوية من أثر قبلي، وهي تمر بمسانها عليها.

لم أدر، بعد ذلك، ما الذي جد في هذا الكون، وجعفي مملوكًا للhallات ذهول مستدام، كانت تقلبى أكثر مما تقلب، والدنيا، لم يحصل أمر جديد بالناكد؛ فما سبب هذا التباطؤ في العمل والانتباه اللامالوف عن عالم المكائن المحيط بي؟ كل شيء كان معروفًا منذ زمن، كان موضوعًا في مكانه من الزمن الأولي، سوء أن هذا القلب بين الضلوع لا يتيضتر، ويضطر. دعتنا كنا، عبر زوجيه المرومية المركز، لزيارة في دورتها الفخمة وتناول طعام العشاء؛ كنا، كنا. كنا. والودة وأنا والشقيقات الثلاث وأزواجهن وأطفالهن. كلكم، كلكم، تأوننا إلينا، ولم يكن لنا، أمام هذا الحنين الجارف، غير أن نقبل شراكين.

خلوتنا الأولى تلك وقبلتها، التي خيل إلى أنها انتهت على جبين وعلى صفحة السماء، تداخلت في ذهني وأعادت لي صور النباتات المجنونة الأخرى بيننا، تذكرت ذلك العشرين؟ إلينا، عطشًا من نوع خاص، يمتلك الروح والجسد وما بينهما، لم أعد قادراً على فراقها إلا بتهانى قليلة، كت أعمل جهدي بعدها كأنفرد بها. لم يكن ذلك مثالًا طوال الوقت؛ وما
was not always possible, and as soon as she left me, my hunger for her returned with a vengeance, burning my chest and my entire being.

We had to be careful as we walked along the garden path towards the entrance of their house. Autumn had arrived and surrounded us, like the evening and sky with its poignant blue shades. I walked beside my mother, trying hard to control myself and to act the way I normally did at home. The dinner party was a festival of emotions, sad memories, never-ceasing yearning, bright lights, cheerful noises and children’s music. She appeared to be in harmony with her husband and her beautiful child.

She only occasionally addressed me. Yet she would drop everything and hang onto my every word whenever I spoke. At times I noticed her looking at me with our usual glance, even if it did not last for more than one second, if that. She stood in front of the glass shelves in a black suit, embroidered with shiny pearls, looking at me with a contemplative, radiant look that was marred by a touch of hidden sadness. Whenever our eyes were about to meet, she elegantly moved to the other side of the room. It was the same look she used to have all those years ago.

It was on that noisy, joyful morning that we stole priceless moments from time; or perhaps it was fate twisting the arm of time so that it would grant those golden moments, against all odds. We quickly went up to the small room we used to call “the Kafshkan”. We did not speak much, especially her. We rushed behind a wardrobe, in a narrow corner, locked in an eager embrace. My hunger for her, this amazing girl, was at its peak. The kisses drowned us in a sea of obliviousness to the world, and I was eager to remove her clothes with my trembling hands. She gave in to my every movement, compliant, silent, kissing me ardently and drowning herself in my eyes. Very soon we were naked and kissing, in no doubt that we were about to perform the wondrous act of creation, when suddenly I was gripped with an unprecedented fear as I looked into her eyes and saw a hidden terror and deep sadness ...

An تفارقني حتى يعود العطش حاداً بحرق صدري وكيناني كله. كنا مضطرين يتعلمون ونحنا ننحدر سائرين عبر عيناد ما إلى مدخل دارهم. كان الخريف هناك، يحيط بنا، والمساء والمساء ذات الزرقة المروية، وكنت أسير جنب والدتي، جاهدة أن أوضوع إيقاع نفسي مع الجو العالمي المألوف.

كانت دعوة العشاء مهرجانًا من العواطف المتبادلة والذكريات الشجية والحنين الذي لم يخمد، والأضواء والصخب المرح وموضيي الأطفال، وكانت مع زوجها وطفلها الجميل، تبدو على أعلى درجات الانسجام. لم تكن توجه إلى الحديث إلا ماماً، غير أنها كانت تقثل انشغالها بأي شيء لتصغي بالانتباه لما أقول. ولحنتها مرة؛ جمعناها نحن الاثنان لحمة هي محتتا لم تقدم إلا ثانية واحدة أو جزء منهما؛ كانت واقفة أمام رفوف الرجاحات في بيئة سماوية مطرزة بالكؤس المشعة، تنظر إلى نظرة متملئة، متلألئة تشوبها سحابة من حزن لا يبين. ولم تدع لي أن أثقف معها بالنظر، وتحرك بخطوة المتران إلى جهة أخرى. تلك النظرة نفسها هي التي متران تعملها في عينيها الجميلتين في سنوات العيد البعيد. عهدنا.

في ذلك الصبح المثرث بالضياء والمرح، حين سرعا من الزمن خطوات لا تنسى؛ أم لعل مصدر العجب، هو الذي لوى ذراع الزمن فتحلقنا، على غير عادة، تلك اللحظات الذهبية. صعدنا برءعة إلى الغرفة الخشبية الصغيرة التي كنا ندعها «كششكان»! لم نتكلم، لم نكن نتبادل الكلام، لا أكثر ولا أقل؛ خاصة هي. انحنينا بلطفه وعجلة خلف دوام للملاس في زاوية ضيقة. كنت في قمة تعبت، لعه، لهذه الصيحة، لهذه الأثر المذهلة. أغطتنا القبل في بحر من الغغاب عن العالم. رأيت نفسي فيه أشتهي نزع ملامشتها بأيد مرفقة. كانت مستمتعة بل كل باردة مي، مستثبة، صامتة، تقبلني بسخاء وغوص ينحوها في عني، وخلاصة نثأة، وحيدان عاربان، ونحن مخلدون. لا شك، على استكمال عملية الخلق العجيبة. هاجمني رعب لا مثل له وأنا أهم بها وأبدلها النظر وأرى في عينيها معنى خفي من الروح، والعمق العميق...
It was that same look she exchanged with me at the party, standing at a distance, behind the sparkling glassware. What is the link between these two looks, so remote in time? I did not know then, and I still do not know today.

At that moment, I pulled away from her, in a flash. I remember it well … Oh, how well I remember the warmth of her abdomen and her bosom, her tenderness and our intertwined limbs. The storm passed peacefully. Unfortunately, my mental state, like other aspects of my life, took a turn for the worse thereafter.

The dinner ended as all great feasts do, with the exchange of presents and telephone numbers, kisses and promises of further visits. We were quite happy as we returned to our respective homes.

I simply wanted to ignore what had happened, and was determined to draw from my store of contentment and satisfaction in order to achieve this, if it had not been for another look from her. She was enthusiastically writing down her telephone number for my mother before we left, when she stopped writing as though she had forgotten something and raised her eyes, for a moment, towards me. Her face was radiant, and the way she looked at me revealed a hidden and obscure desire I was able to decipher despite my bewilderment.

When we spoke on the telephone, she said, in her warm voice: “Thank you for this call, Abdul Rahman. Thank you very much. I wanted to talk to you, and you’ve made it easy for me. If only you knew how happy I was to see you all.”

“To see us all?”

“You don’t know what you all mean to me and how I value you all; you above everyone else, and, of course, the rest of your family. Forgive me, Abdul Rahman, that I won’t be able to see you. I’m indebted to you for everything.”

“To me? I don’t know what you mean.”

“Oh, how could you say that? Don’t you remember? You didn’t ruin me, though you could have done. Don’t you
remember? You spared me. You spared my life, and I can never forget that. You’re the one who granted me the life I’m living now. Anyway, how are you? Do you know what happened to me when I saw you ... that day ...?” She stopped talking for a moment, evidently struggling to continue the conversation. “Your mother told me that you’re happy with her. Is that true, Abdul Rahman? Tell me you are happy. Aren’t you happy?”

“To some extent; to be more precise, I’m content with my circumstances. I have an ample store of such feelings.”

“Is that enough? Is that enough for you?”

“What else can I do?”

I heard her sigh.”Can I help you in any way ... as a friend?”

I did not respond. An embarrassing silence passed.

She asked me: “Are you still ill? I mean, you know ...”

“More or less. I’m of no use to anyone.”

“Really? Oh, God! Our happy times didn’t last for long.”

The next day I sought refuge in that store of feelings I had proudly told her about. I only found hunger, misunderstanding and hollow echoes, which rang out the name of “Khadija”.

انساه مطلقاً. أنت الذي منحتني حياتي هذه. ولكن. كيف أنت؟ هل تعلم ماحصل لي وأنا أراك. رأيت ذلك اليوم. وسمعت؟ وكانت تغالب نفسها، كما يبدو، كي تستمر في الكلام: قالت في الولدنة أنك سعيد معها. ليس كذلك ياعبد الرحمن؟ هل في أنك سعيد. أنت سعيد؟

إلى حد ما. أنا بالأحرى قانع بما أنا فيه. لذي خزين من هذه المشاعر. هل تكفيف هذا؟ هل تكفيف؟ ومالعمل إنا؟ سميتها تنهد:

- أستطيع مساعدتك. كصديقة؟ لم أجهزها. مرت بسبيشة صمت مرح. سألتني:
- لا تزال مرحبة؟ أعني أن تعلم. تقريباً. لا فائدة مني كبرى. حقاً يا إلهي. لم تدم أوقاتنا السعيدة طويلاً. استنجدت، في اليوم التالي، بذلك الخزين الذي حدثها عنه بالاختيار.

فلم ألقى إلا العطش، وسوء الفهم والأصداء الجوفاء. كان اسمها "خديجة".
Language Notes

1. “storage” (خَزْنٌ (i), “to store”).

2. المَزْنَات: لَمْ تَرَ + مُزْنَي (ما لم تر + مزني) : لَمْ تَرَ المَزْنَات (“not” + “seen”; cf. المَزْنَات: “the visible world”). The use of the particle لَمْ (immaterialism). Note that if the article is added, there are two لَمْ ل. e.g. المَزْنَات: ا لَمْ (irresponsibility). The Arabic words غَمٌّ ( غَمَّ, غَمْ, غَمَّ وَغَمَّ وَغَمَّ) (شَكِيْقَة “unreasonable”).

3. شَكِيْقَة: (sh, pl. شَكِيْقَات) شَكِيْقٌ: أَشْفَقَ, شَكِيْقَة (pl. شَكِيْقَات) شَكِيْقٌ: أَشْفَقَ (days of glory).

4. أُحْتَ (i. e. same father and mother) as أُحْتَ أَخُو, can be used for “stepsister”, “half-sister” or even as a form of address for an unrelated female.

5. خَانٍ (خَانٌ) (days of glory).

6. أَخُو: lit. “Time has betrayed (the family).”

7. أَخُو: lit. “God opened the door of livelihood to both of them”; in this context, however, it means that God had mercy on them.

8. أَخُو: lit. “the world descended on us”, i.e. things declined in material terms.

9. أَخُو: lit. “time was cruel to us”; جُوُرُمْ (u), “to oppress”, “to commit an outrage” جُوُرُمْ > جُوُرُمْ جُوُرُمْ, “oppression”, “injustice”.

10. (pronounced “ra’s al-chol) a suburb of Baghdad at the end of Bab El-Sheikh (see next note). Note that the Iraqi dialect (like some Gulf dialects, as well as Palestinian) has the sound “ch” (as in “Charles”), which is usually represented in writing by the so-called “three-dotted jim”, i.e. ج. This letter is originally Persian, which has provided other letters to render “European” sounds: ب (for “p”) and گ (for “g”). Note, however, that in Egypt ج is used to denote “j” (as in “genre”); cf. جَرَجَ, “garage” (since ج is pronounced “g” in ECA). In Morocco “g” is represented by a three-dotted kaf ۶ as in the place-name أكادير.

11. باب الدُّنْيَا: one of the densest populated areas, situated in the heart of Baghdad. Literally meaning “the door of the Shaykh”, it refers to Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qâdir al-Gaylânî, (1077-1165), whose tomb is in the Mosque that is named after him, and which attracts thousands of visitors each year. Fu‘âd al-Takarli was born in Bab El-Sheikh.

12. أَيَامُ النِّعْمَة: lit. “days of glory”.

13. القطار لم يفتح بعد على: lit. “the train has not passed me by yet”, i.e. there is still time for me to get married.

14. الدور: a small town some twenty kilometres outside Baghdad, known for its oil refineries.

15. سَنَةُ المَجَامِع: lit. “law of society”, meaning customary procedure. In another context سَنَةُ المتَّبَعُ or سَنَةُ المتَّبَعُ refers, of course, to the Sunna or conduct of the Prophet Muhammad.

16. رَقِيبُ أَوْلَى: this military term corresponds to رَقِيبُ أَوْلَى (pl. رَقِيِّبُ أَوْلِيِّين) in many other countries (Egypt, Syria, Lebanon). The word رَقِيف is the plural of رَقِيف, which is, variously, a “sergeant” (Iraq) or a “corporal” (e.g. in Egypt, Syria).

17. مَرَافِق: this term is restricted to Iraq; in many other Arab countries, the term مَلَام is used.

18. يا لَلْعَقِيرُ: on the use of the vocative particle (with ل) لَعْقِيرُ in this exclamatory phrase, meaning: “Oh, what a (strange) fate!”, see كَبَّابٌ المَوْتِ, note No 5.

19. الدُّكَالَة: أَسْتَعْمَامَة or أَسْتَعْمَامَة (in Egypt it is known as مُغْلَّة) (pl. مُغْلَّات) دُكَالَة: lit. “they tasted the two bitter things” دُكَالَة > دُكَالَة (u), “to taste”.

20. قُرُّيَّتهم الرُّكَمَيْة: “their Turkmen village”; most of the populations of the villages around the city of Kirkuk are Turkmens (a Turkic ethnic group found also in areas
around Arbil and Mosul) and Kurdish.

21. كركوك: an oil-rich city in the north of Iraq.

22. جاءها النصيب أخيراً: lit. “fate came to her eventually”, i.e. she got married in the end.

23. الغطش: note that in this figurative expression, the Arabic refers to “thirst”, whereas in English it is “hunger”.

24. كفشكان: an old name for a room built inside another room in some traditional Iraqi houses, where the ceiling of the room is very high. Access is provided by a wooden staircase. In some cases, it is simply an attic. It is usually used for the storage of furniture, etc. It is also known as the كنجهية.

Laylā al-‘Uthmān

Born in Kuwait in 1945, Laylā al-‘Uthmān (Leila Othman) is a well-known novelist and short-story writer. She began writing at a very early age while still at school, and published articles in many local periodicals on social and literary issues. She is regarded as one of the most prominent female fiction writers of the Arabian Peninsula. Her collections of short stories include امرأة في إناء (A Woman in a Vessel, 1976), الرحل (The Departure, 1979) and الحب لن يصمد (Love Has Many Images, 1982). Her novels include المرأة والقطة (The Woman and the Cat, 1985) and وشميمة تخرج من البحر (Sumayya Comes Out of the Sea, 1986). Her most recent novel, المحاكمة (The Trial, 2000), portrays the various political and social conflicts she has experienced in her native country.

In her fiction, al-‘Uthmān deals with conflicts between men and women and with the outside world, often concentrating on specifically Arab themes and on the position of women in Middle Eastern society. Many of her works have been translated into a number of European languages (e. g. Russian, German and Swedish).

The following story deals with the aspirations, dreams and frustrations of two women belonging to entirely different social and economic backgrounds. At the same time, it also affords the reader a glimpse into the complex social fabric of a society in flux, inextricably bound up with the theme of guest workers.
Night of Torment

With yearning eyes, she looked at the perfume bottle that had been left behind, next to one of the washbasins. She felt a strong urge to grab it, open it and spray a little on her rough palm, in which she was grasping a quarter dinar note given to her earlier by the owner of the perfume on her way out. She thought: “What if I took the bottle and sprayed it all over my body, so my enticing fragrance could spread like that of all other women?”

Before she could give in to the urge, however, the owner of the bottle returned to the washroom, marched towards the bottle, put it in her handbag and gave her another quarter dinar, as if to reward her for finding the bottle in its place. Then she quickly left, her fragrance lingering in the air.

Her veins seemed to extend like fingertips, gathering the smallest particles of the fragrance that made its way from her nose to her lungs, which were saturated with the toilet odour. However, soon after, the smell of disappointment dispelled every whiff of the fragrance.

Since she had started her humble job as an attendant in the ladies’ room at the airport, she had been inhaling the black nauseating air that flowed into her windpipe, soothed only by transitory fragrances.

She was sitting in her plastic chair, taking in the daily arrivals with languishing eyes: women attired in colourful, elegant clothes, girls squeezed into tight jeans and short blouses, all of whom were in a hurry to relieve themselves. Her ears registered the rustling sound of women’s clothes sliding down their bodies, followed by trickling bladders and murmuring bowels, and then the waterfall of the flush expelling the waste, leaving only the odour in the air.

When the women left the cubicles, they gathered at the
امشاطهن الملونة، يسوي خصلات شعرهن المتنايرة. وآخرين تمشت تلك الرشات المتلاحقة من عطر الزجاجات الشفافة بخجن ببعضها مسرعان ملبسات للمسافرين المتجهين إلى ... التوجه إلى بوابة رقم ... 

بدأ عملها بالتقاط الأوراق المتنايرة على الأرض، وتكمل الكويت فوق أغطية سلال المجملان، تنظر في الأحذاء البيضاء، تكتسي بالفرنجة ما علق بحواجبها تصب قليلا من الدينار، تسقى الأطراف تسوي الرولات المهدلة، يهملها ذلك المكان لقادمات آخرات مستقلات. تعود إلى كرسيها مؤملة بكم ببعضهن، ربع دينار، نصف دينار، أفكار ممدهدة. وكتيرات بخجن غير مكتيرات موجودة ولا يحلمها الذي لا يبدأ ولا يبور فتهمها لنفسها كل مرة: "ذاي يوم سأامتلك زجاجة عطر." 

حين تخرج إلى الشارع بعد إنهاء عملها، تراكم فيها روائح السيارات والبشر والأطعمة الممزوجة، تتراكم داخل أنفها، تحسنتها أشهر من رائحة نهارها الطويل داخل الحمام. وحين تحتو باب الملحق اللباس الذي تمسكه تخس روائح المكبوتة تهب إليها كفواه مفتوحة تخف ريحها تطرد روائح الشارع فلا تبقى سوى رائحة الحمام الاصطح بجسدها وملابسها في الليل يسجها فهيها. تحرصها صور النساء بزيهن وموديلات ملبسهن تكمن آه، وتستم تشيق لعلها تتصدر ولو لمرة من روائح عطورهن. لكنها تصمم خذ رائحة زوجها الشاهر برقها تعب رائحة دهن (السمبوسك وكما البطاطا) التي يشيع بها حيث يعمل في المطعم الهندي. تتحرق وتكتب أفواه حسرتها: "بالتأكيد هو يشم بريئته الملاحظ."
منحتي حنان التمني، تخيل أنها ممسكة بreira عطر فقير حلمها المكنوسي: "حين أشرى منها على جسدي ستطرد كل رواحنا، ستنتقم بعضنا أكثر". تام وفي دهاليز الأحلام بجذ نفسي تطارد عرافات من الزجاجات ذات الأجنحة.

ذات يوم أسقطت في حيرة أهالى - دنارك - تصترع أثر
وهبها ثروة لك لاتهرد إليه وفاجأتك:

- أريد زجاجة عطرك.

قصصتك أن تتهيأ حال واقعها وكئفك تمتد ثانية بالدينار:

- الدنار أفيد لك من العطر.

لكنها أصرت على رفضها والمسمك بطلع العطر، لم تختمل سناجة تطلعها الأجذب وعيناك تسريان على ثابتها الرئة، وغطاء، رأسها ذي الهواء المسنن، حال لا ينسسه عطر كعطرك. شعرت بإحساسات المرصد ضدها، مسحبت على ملامسها ببهلو مقصود وهي تركز على ثابك الأنيقة، أدرت أن تذكريها بيضاء، بحالة دائرة من كله، أدرت لمساحة الحمام، أطلت صوتك قاصدة أن تكتبي رغبتها الشيقة إلى العطر:

- ماذا يفديك العطر وانت هنا؟

ابستمت لتكبتود بارد نثرت كلماتها بتوسل لا يخول من رغرفة دمع

مكتموم:

- أشرى في الليل ليجذب زوجي.

 أمسكت في دائرة الدهشة والحزن. شعرت دنارك الفم فتغالة لدانية قلبك لم ترددتي. أخرجت زجاجتك الصغيرة ومنحتها لها، انحت فرحها.

إلى كعك الشقيق لتقبلها لكعك عاجلت بهذبه وفركت من نواية الرحلة، وكنت في الواقع تفرين من ذكرى تعششت طحالبها في بعبرة حياتك. والآن تفجح آمالك تلك السنوات التي كنت. مراحتك أثلت من ألف عام.

فدعك أهالى الحمام يعدن قادة أن تفكي آجرة ذاكرتك في الحدثة التي أنهيت ربط حرام الأمان في الطائرة. أعمل جفنيك، وشرعت تستعرضن ليا ليالي الموجة التي كانت تمضي وأنت مركونة في زوايا الفراش.
nights that went by as you lay cowering in the corner of the bed, after having endured his daily rage. He ignored you, even though you were sweeter than an apple and fresher than a rose. He ignored you, yet he longed for you and desired you. You had been warned that he was a “womaniser”, “drinker”, “selfish” and “bad-tempered”. Yet your mind was set. You had been smitten by his good looks and sweet talk, which drew you towards his deceitful, shallow exterior. Your conceit was another reason: “With my beauty and intelligence, he will prefer me above all other women and I’ll keep him on the straight and narrow.”

Early on, your life changed and your dreams were shattered; you did not captivate him, nor did he surrender. You smelled other women’s perfumes on his clothes and washed off the traces of their make-up. You imagined what they looked like, wondering whether they were better looking or smarter than you. The worst was the moment you discovered his affair with your closest friend, whose face, body and voice were so familiar to you.

That particular night stretched in front of you unlike any other night, as he came home high-spirited and drunk; unusual for him, he was carrying a parcel in a coloured wrapping. You were suddenly filled with a joy that touched the deepest of your dashed hopes, and you wondered: “Did he remember me and buy me a present?”

You waited until he went to bed and started snoring. Your overwhelming curiosity made you open the parcel. To your amazement, it contained a luxurious bottle. You opened the pink card and read his sweet dedication to your treacherous friend: “Your favourite perfume that makes my heart spin and makes me your slave forever.”

Your deepest hopes were crushed as though they had been ground by a thousand millstones and turned into frantic grains of dust besieging you, inflaming your innermost jealousy and stinging your soul with a stupid hope: “What if I captivated you with it tonight?”

You went into the bathroom and rubbed your soft body, which had been untouched for more than two months, and put on a diaphanous sky-blue nightdress. You held the perfume bottle and poured half its
enticing content all over your body, up to your fingertips. You sneaked under the duvet and moved close to him, reducing the distance that usually separated you, your body tingling with desire. You had hardly settled in when he started and awoke from his deep sleep, as though he'd been stung. Your heart fluttered and your hope grew: "He'll water me after the drought and call my ripe fruit. This perfume is truly magic."

You were terrified by his savage reaction as he ripped the sky-blue nightie with his hands, screaming: "How dare you wear her perfume?!" His outburst was like that of a thousand volcanoes. He threw the perfume away, and the only thing left were noxious fumes. He pushed you out of the bed and kicked you along the floor, while you called out for help against the pain in your heart. He spat on you, cursed you and dragged you to the bathroom. He threw you into the tub and emptied the box of washing powder and any other detergents he could get hands on over you. He started to drown you with the hot shower water in order to remove all traces of the perfume from your body, while you flapped about helplessly like a fish.

The door slammed shut, and you spent a night that was worse than a thousand torments, in the tub, drowned by liquids and the torture. How much time has gone by since you snatched your soul from his brackish lake, the thick curtains of oblivion cloaking the smell of your former torment?

She went from the restroom into the street, elated, her nose prepared for the onslaught of perfume and the mixture of the usual smells. It was a day unlike other days, and an eagerly anticipated night that would not be like other nights. She felt a great debt to that woman. She did not regret refusing a dinar she greatly needed. Instead, she was holding something that was far more precious and coveted. She was on cloud nine, and dreams are not bothered by busy traffic. If it had not been for the sound of the horn from a speeding car, she would have been run over. She held on tight to her worn bag, where she kept the bottle that she guarded as closely as her heart. She reached the bus stop and sat down in the shelter. She pulled the
precious treasure out of her bag, and whispered to it: “Oh, how I've dreamed of this bottle!” She stared at it, played with it. She took off its golden top and held the atomizer to her nose. Just as she was about to spray some perfume on her, the bus arrived and a mob of Asian workers like her, as well as those from other parts of the world, jostled to board.

The bus filled with the odour of summer sweat on the exhausted workers’ bodies, mixed with the scent of coconut oil they treated their hair with, malodorous feet and pungent breath, heavy with the customary aroma of spices and asb. All of them invaded her nose, normally filled with the smell of the airport lavatory that stuck to her clothes and skin. She thought of the treasure in her bag, took it out and cupped it in her palms, like a mother cradling her child’s head. She smiled and lovingly stared at the bottle, filled with a desire to open it. She wetted the tip of her finger with the perfume and put some on the tip of her nose in order to subdue the smells in the bus.

The man next to her moved in the seat. His elbow collided with her arm, jolting it; she closed her palms, fearful for the bottle, and clutched it to her chest so that it appeared she was reciting some sacred prayers.

She entered her flat, and for the first time she felt that something valuable had come in with her. She rushed to take the bottle out of her bag and kissed it repeatedly, her heart filled with a hitherto unknown joy. She began to flirt with the bottle, praising it: “Finally, my love, you are mine, and my body will know no smell other than yours. Ah … thank you, generous lady.” She danced with the bottle in the narrow room, dreaming of a night other than the one she knew.

How could she know the secrets of the perfume, its meaning and how to treat it? She did not even know how to celebrate its arrival in her home, the smell of the first spray on her fragrance-free body. It did not occur to her to bathe first in order to remove the various odours, nor, for that matter, to change...
her time-worn, kitchen-stained clothes, reeking of the airport lavatory. She did not comb her hair, thick with stale, greasy lotions, or put make-up on her face, which was used to the dust and the bus exhaust. She was overwhelmed with immense joy, her long-held dream beckoning.

The moment she decided to put on the perfume, the bottle she was holding in her hands turned into something resembling an insect spray pursuing the buzz of a dull fly; she became the fly whizzing around and spraying herself randomly, not caring what she sprayed, whether it be parts of her body, her hair or her garments. The sound of the atomizer spray mixed with her laughter, singing and the sighs of incipient delight. She emptied the entire bottle, apart from a little bit that remained at the bottom and could not be reached by the siphon. She was determined not to leave a single drop; with a pestle she broke the bottleneck, extracted the last drops and applied them to her hair and cheeks, oblivious to the small pieces of broken glass that were scratching her.

She decided not to do any work. She made herself comfortable on the cotton bed and relaxed in the knowledge that tonight he would not turn over, claiming he was tired. Tonight, the gulf of perfume would draw him to her hungry body, which would be cured from the pain of waiting. This magical fragrance would make him empty his hidden rain and spray his stored seeds.

When he slipped into bed, he as usual began to snore from exhaustion. She felt his head twisting and turning, like someone chasing away silly ideas. He kicked with his legs as though pushing away a mouse or a cockroach that had climbed onto them. Then she heard him sniffing – fast, repetitive sniffs – like someone trying to ascertain the source of a particular smell. She realized that he had discovered a new smell. She was under the illusion that he was aroused by her. In her conceit, she moved close to him and grabbed his back; he shook, but did not turn towards her. She pounced on him, her body on
top of his, confident that he would reciprocate, attracted by her perfume and lusting for her body. Instead, he sighed twice and rolled over to the side she had vacated. He was restless, while his breathing came close to sneezing. She started to have doubts about the perfume: “Is it possible that no one other than the person wearing the perfume can smell it, or has he got a cold?”

Suddenly he turned towards her; her heart sang, her body shuddered and her hunger grew, but in that brief moment, her smile evaporated as her dream shattered and his scream hit her like the plague: “You smell horrible tonight, I can’t stand it! Go and wash!”

She felt as though her body was falling into a deep well, from which rose the stench of filled lavatories. The smells from the soles of her feet swept to the rest of her body, removing any traces of the perfume and taking its place.
Language Notes

1. فهْر (مُصَدَّر) of the verb "to cause" or "to force", as well as "to defeat" (e.g. فهْر الجيش عدوه, "the army defeated its enemy").

2. دينار: the local currency in various Arab countries, e.g. Jordan, Iraq, Tunisia, Algeria and Libya. Its plural (متعاة) is sometimes used in the sense of "money" (cf. فلس).

3. مرحاض: pl. of مرحاض "Toilet", "urinal". Other terms for "lavatory" or "restroom" include بيت الراحة (lit. "the house of rest").

4. خشر (i, u), "to press", "squeeze".

5. خشتر: lit. "the store of the bowels".

6. سيفون: colloquial (Fr. siphon); MSA سيفون: the "house of excrement").

7. سيفون: a common snack in many South Asian countries.

8. كبة البطاطا: a small, round, savoury snack of mashed potatoes, meat and spices, deep-fried in oil.

9. خاتم: very formal word for "silver" (cf. ضجة).

10. س بوتو: colloquial (It. bagno); MSA باتو: خو الاستحمام (pl. of باتو), "spices"; cf. بارات.

11. الارش: Iranian thick vegetable soup.

12. ملَح: (pl. ملَحات), a reference to the fact that in the Gulf states, the servants’ quarters are usually located in an annex to the house or building they work in. In some cases (e.g. in Saudi Arabia), the word also denotes an extra floor to a house.

Yūsuf Idrīs

Yūsuf Idrīs (1927–91) is considered the undisputed master of the Egyptian short story. Originally trained as a doctor at the University of Cairo, he briefly worked at the famous Qaṣr al-‘Aynī hospital in central Cairo. During his student days he was also, like so many of his contemporaries (e.g. Idwār al-Kharrāṭ), active in the nationalist movement, and was imprisoned by the British authorities. Idrīs’s involvement in politics would remain a constant throughout his life. As with most Arab intellectuals, the Arab-Israeli war of 1967 was a watershed moment, and until his death Idrīs remained a staunch champion of the Palestinian cause.

As an author, Idrīs’s career was extremely varied, spanning novels, criticism, journalism (he, for many years, had a column in Egypt’s leading daily, الاهرام, and plays, as well as short stories. In addition to eleven collections of short stories, Idrīs wrote nine plays, the most famous of which is undoubtedly الباريـه (al-Farafeer).

His stories invariably deal with social issues affecting the nation’s poor and dispossessed, without, however, descending into maudlin social realism or pessimism. Idrīs’s protagonists battle against the odds, and always manage to rise to the challenges with which they are faced.

In terms of style, Idrīs was a trailblazer in that he was one of
the few to mix Standard Arabic with the Egyptian colloquial in the dialogue of the villagers whose lives he portrayed with such imagination and sensitivity; the Egyptian dialect even shines through in the Standard Arabic passages. Though this practice was condemned by some of his fellow literati – not least by Najib Mahfuz, who continued to use Standard Arabic for both narrative and dialogue – it made Idris all the more popular among the Egyptian reading public.

In addition to individual stories, the following works by Idris have been translated into English: أرْخُصُ لِبَالِي (The Cheapest Nights and Other Stories, 1978); الخَرَام (The Sinners, 1984); Rings of Burnished Brass (1992); and City of Love and Ashes (1999).

He died of heart failure while in London for medical treatment.

The story that is presented here is culled from the collection entitled حادثة وَفْتَفْ (An Incident of Honour), which was published in 1961. It is a delightful example of Idris’ ‘house style’: witty – even comical at times – yet never condescending; socially committed, yet devoid of meretricious soapbox antics. The story is set in a sleepy fictional village (even though it shares its name with several others, the biggest being in Dakahlia province, near the mouth of the river Nile), with the events surrounding the protagonist serving as a prism through which the author deals with a number of serious issues, such as poverty, solidarity, tradition and belief. As usual, the prose is polished and the dialogues wonderfully vivid and evocative; this is Egypt’s master story teller at his best.

طبقية من السماء

A Tray from Heaven
If you see someone running along the streets of Munyat al-Nasr, that is an event. People rarely run there. Indeed, why should anybody run in a village where nothing happens to warrant running? Meetings are not measured in minutes and seconds. The train moves as slowly as the sun. There is a train when it rises, one when it reaches its zenith and another one at sunset. There is no noise that gets on one’s nerves, or causes one to be in a hurry. Everything moves slowly there, and there is never any need for speed or haste. As the saying goes: “The Devil takes a hand in what is done in haste.”

If you see someone running in Munyat al-Nasr, that is an event, just as when you hear a police siren you imagine that something exciting must have happened. How wonderful it is for something exciting to happen in such a peaceful and lethargic village!

On that particular Friday, it was not just one person who was running in Munyat al-Nasr; rather, it was a whole crowd. Yet no one knew why. The streets and alleys were basking in the usual calm and tranquillity that descended upon the village after the Friday noon prayers, when the streets were sprinkled with frothy rose-scented water smelling of cheap soap; when the women were busy inside the houses preparing lunch and the men were loitering outside until it was time to eat. On that particular day, the peace and tranquillity were broken by two big, hairy legs running along the street and shaking the houses. As the runner passed a group sitting outside a house, he did not fail to greet them. The men returned the greeting and tried to ask him why he was running, but before they could do so he had already moved on. They wanted to know the reason, but, of course, were unable to find out. Their desire to know compelled them to start walking. Then one of them suggested they walk faster, and suddenly they found themselves running. They were not amiss in greeting the various groups sitting outside the houses who, in turn, also started running.

أن ترى إنسانا يجري في شوارع من شوارع مني النصر، فذلك حادث، فالناس هناك نادراً ما يجريون، ولماذا يجريون وليس في القرية ما يستحق الجري، المعاد لا يتعرض للذكاء والذكاء، والفتورات تتحرك في بطن الشمس. قطع إذا ضحيت، و آخرين يأتي تعود النسيم، ومع غبيها يقفون واحد. ولا ضحيه هناك في الأعصاب، ويدفع إلى التهور والسرعة، كل شيء يطيه، هادي، عاقل، وكل شيء فائعلى مستمع ببطنه، وهمه ذاك، والسرعة غير مطلوبة أبداً، والعجلة من الشيطان.

أن ترى واحداً يجري في شوارع مني النصر، في ذلك حادث. وكأنه سوت السربة في عربة "بويولس النجدة"، فلا بد أن نراه جريه أمراً مثيراً، وما أجمل أن يحدث في البلدية الناهدة البيذية أمر مثير.

وفي يوم الجمعة ذاك، لا يمكن واحد فقط هو الذي يجري في مني النصر، الواقع أنه تكون هناك حركة جري واسعة النطاق. ولم يكن أحد يعرف السبب. فالشارع كالأزقة يصبح في هدوئها الأبدية، ويبتديها ذلك الركود الذي يستمر في العادة بعد صلاة الجمعة حيث ترش أرضاً بمال العصيل المخلته بالرغوة والزهور ورائحة الصباوان الرخيص، وحيث السمرة في الداخل مشغولات بإعداد الغذاء والشراب في الخارج يسبكون ويشكلون إلى أن ينتهي إعداد الغذاء. وإذا بهذا الهدوء كله تعبر سيقان ضخمة غليظة تجري وتتحرك في البروت. ومر الجارى بجماعة جائزة أمام بيته فلا ينسى وهو يجري أن يلقى السلام، ويرد الجائسون سلامه ويحاولون سؤاله عن الجري ولكنهم لا يعرفون قد نفد. حينئذ يقفون ويحاولون معرفة السبب، وطبعاً لا يستطيعون. وحينئذ يذكرون حب الاستطلاع إلى المشي، ثم يقترح أحدهم الإرساع فيساعون ويجدون أنفسهم آخر الأمر بجروح، ولا يبنون أن يلقوا السلام على جماعات الجاليين، فتفرق الجماعات ولا تتبع أن يجد نفسها تجري في الأخرى.
However obscure the motive, it was bound to be known in the end, just as it is inevitable that people quickly start gathering at the scene of an accident. It is a small village. There are thousands of people who will give you directions. You are able to run its length and breadth without running out of breath.

It did not take long before a crowd began to gather near the threshing floor. Everyone who was able to run had arrived; only the old and aged remained scattered in the street. They preferred to saunter, as village elders do, and to leave a space between them and the youngsters. However, they were also hurrying, intent on arriving before it was too late and the incident became news.

Like other towns, Munyat al-Nasr was superstitious about Friday, and any event that took place on that day was viewed as a sure catastrophe. The people of the village were, however, excessively superstitious. They were opposed to any work being done on that day for fear it would end in failure, and thus they postponed all work until Saturday. If you asked them why they were so superstitious about it, they would tell you it was because Friday is a day of misfortune. It was, however, clear that this was not the real reason; rather, it was merely a pretext enabling the farmers to put off Friday work until Saturday. And so, Friday became the day of rest. The word “rest” was considered ugly among the farmers, as well as an insult to their toughness and to their extraordinary ability to work indefatigably. Only townspeople needed rest, that is, those who had fresh meat and worked in the comfort of the shade, and in spite of that, still ran out of breath. Weekly rest was a heresy. So, Friday must surely have been a day of bad luck. As a result, work had to be postponed until Saturday.

It is for this reason that people expected that the running meant a grave misfortune had befallen one of them. But when they arrived at the threshing floor they did not find a flat-nosed cow, a raging fire or one man killing another. Instead they found Sheikh Ali standing in the middle of the floor. He was in
a fit of anger, and had taken off his jilbab and turban. He was holding his stick and shaking it violently. When people asked what was going on, the ones who had arrived first replied: “The sheikh will blaspheme God.”

At that moment people began to laugh. This was undoubtedly another of Sheikh Ali’s jokes. In fact, he himself was regarded as a joke. His head was the size of a donkey’s, whereas his eyes were as wide and round as those of an owl, except that his were bloodshot in the corners. His voice was hoarse and loud, like a rusty steam engine. He never smiled. When he was happy, which was rare, he would laugh boisterously. When he was not happy, he would scowl. A single word that he did not like was enough to make his blood boil to the extent that it would be turned into fuel, and he would swoop down on the one who had uttered the word that had caused offence. He might even bear down on this person with his fat-fingered hands, or his hooked, iron-tipped stick, which was made out of thick cane. He was very fond of it and cherished it, calling it “the commandant”.

Sheikh Ali’s father had sent him to al-Azhar for his education. One day, his teacher made the mistake of calling him “a donkey”, to which Sheikh Ali, true to type, had retorted: “And you are as stupid as sixty donkeys.” After he was expelled, he returned to Munyat al-Nasr, where he became a preacher and imam at the mosque. One day he mistakenly performed the prayers with three genuflections. When the congregation attempted to warn him, he cursed all their fathers, gave up being an imam and stopped going to the mosque. He even gave up praying. Instead, he took up playing cards, and continued to play until he had to sell everything he owned. At that moment, he swore he would give that up too.

When Muhammad Effendi, the primary schoolteacher in the district capital, opened a grocery shop in the village, he suggested to Sheikh Ali that he should keep the shop open in the morning, which he accepted. However, this only lasted for
three days. On the fourth day, Muhammad Effendi could be seen standing in front of his shop, dripping with halva. Sheikh Ali had discovered that Muhammad Effendi had put a piece of metal in the scales to doctor them. Sheikh Ali had told him: “You’re a crook.” No sooner had Muhammad Effendi said: “How dare you, Sheikh Ali! Shut up if you want to keep your job!” than the sheikh hurled a handful of halva at him. From that day onwards, nobody ever dared to give Sheikh Ali any work. But even if anybody had dared, it would not have mattered as Sheikh Ali himself was no longer interested in working anyway.

Sheikh Ali was also a very ugly man as well as irascible and unemployed, and yet nobody in the village really hated him. Quite the contrary; most of the villagers loved him and liked to exchange funny stories about him. Their greatest joy was to sit around him and arouse his anger, much to everyone’s merriment. When he got angry and his features darkened, unable to speak, it was impossible for any of the bystanders to control themselves and not collapse with laughter. They kept on egging him on, while he grew angrier and angrier. They would laugh until the end of the gathering. Everyone would utter: “What a character you are, Sheikh Ali!” They would then leave him alone to vent his anger on “Abu Ahmad”, which is what he called his poverty. He considered Abu Ahmad his arch-enemy. Sheikh Ali spoke about his poverty as if it were a person of flesh and blood standing in front of him. Usually, the tirade would be sparked if someone asked him:

“So what has Abu Ahmad done to you today, Sheikh Ali?”

Sheikh Ali would fly into a real rage at that moment, because he did not like anyone to talk about his poverty when he was talking to it. And whenever people talked about his poverty he would be driven to rage. Sheikh Ali was, in fact, quite shy, despite his stern features and words. He preferred to go for days without smoking, rather than ask any of the villagers to roll
him a cigarette. He always carried a needle and thread about his person in order to mend his jilbab in case it became torn. When his clothes got dirty, he would go far away from the village in order to wash them, and would remain naked until they were dry. Because of this, his turban was cleaner than any other turban in the village.

So it was only natural that the people of Munyat al-Nasr laughed at this new drollery on that particular day. However, in this case the laughter soon died down and people fell silent, tongue-tied with fear. The word blasphemy was a terrible one to use, especially in a village that, like any other, lived in peace and tranquillity. Its people were good people, who knew nothing except their work and family. Just like any other village, there were petty thieves stealing cornsobs, big thieves raiding cattle pens and snatching the excess cattle with hooks; big and small tradesmen; known and unknown loose women; honest folk and liars; spies; sick people; spinsters and righteous people. However, you found them all in the mosque when the muezzin called the faithful to prayer. You would not find a single one of them breaking their fast during Ramadan.

There are laws and guiding principles of life that everyone must abide by: a thief does not steal from another thief; no one blames anyone for his profession; and no one dares to talk about things that would offend public feelings. And there was Sheikh Ali blasphemously talking to God in this way without hindrance. The villagers were laughing a little, but as soon as they heard what he was saying, they were dumbstruck.

Sheikh Ali’s head was bare, and his short-cropped white hair glistened with sweat. In his right hand, he clutched his stick. His eyes were glowing like embers, while a look of fierce and senseless anger had settled on his face.

He said, addressing the sky: “What do you want from me? Can you tell me what is it that you want from me? I left al-Azhar because of some sheikhs who act as if they are the sole

جلباه إذًا تمزق، وإذا اتساخ ذهب بعيدًا عن البلدة وغسل ثيابه وظل عارية حتى تجف. ولذلك كانت عمامته الوحيدة أنفظ عمامته في البلدة.

كان حريًا إذًا بأهل منّا أن يضحكوا من هذه النادرة الجديدة. ولكن الضحكات كانت تموت في الحال... والألسن ترتعج خائفة إلى الحلوة وكتابنا دعتها تقارب، فكلمة الكفر كلمة بشعة. والبلدة مثل غيرها من البلاد تحيا في آمن الله، فيها كل ما متخذه به سائر البلاد. الناس الطيوب الذين لا يعرفون إلا أعمالهم ويوثونهم. واللصوص الضارين الذين يسرقون كيانات الأزل. والكبار الذين يقنعون الزراب والمحبين الهائم من أنفوقها بالخطاطيف، والتجار الذين يتجرون باللبان. وتجار القروش، والقساوسة المعبوث غير المعروفات وأولئك المعروفات على نطاق البلدة كلها، والصادقون والكافرون والخافر. والمرضى والعوانس والصالحين: فيها كل ما متخذه به سائر البلاد. ولكن الجميع تجددهم في الجماعة إذا أذن المؤذن للصلاة، ولا تجد واحدًا منهم فقطًا في رمضان. وثمة قوافين مربعية تنظم حياة الكفر ويسهمون في الأصول، فلا يتعدى اللص على لص، ولا أحد يعبر أبداً بصنعته ولا يجرح واحد على تجدي الحفر العام. وإذا بالشيخ علي يقف ويخطب الله هكذا بلا إلح ولا دستور.

كانوا يضحكون قليلاً ولكنهم ما يؤكدون يسمعون ما يقوله حتى يتلوه وجوم.

كان رأسه عارياً وشعره القصير يلمع بالعرق وبالشيب والعصا الخمداد في يمينه وعيناه نفثان حمماء. وفي وجهه غضب أحمق شديد، وكان يقول موجهًا كلمته إلى السماء:

- أنت عابِرٌ مني يا! تقدر تقول لي أنت عابِر مني يا! الأزهر وسنته؟
- عشان ً عابِر صوابي؟ المشابه اللي ً عامل؟ أوصي大局 اللي: ومراةً
guardians of the faith. I divorced my wife, sold my house, and out of all people you chose me to inflict Abu Ahmad on. Why me? Who don’t you send down your anger, oh Lord, on Churchill or on Eisenhower? Or is it because you can only do it to me? What do you want from me now?

“So many times in the past you made me hungry, and I endured it. I would tell myself: ‘Imagine it’s the month of Ramadan, and you’re fasting. It’s only one day, and it’ll pass.’ But, this time, I haven’t eaten anything since yesterday afternoon, and I haven’t had any cigarettes for a week. I haven’t touched hash for ten days. You’re telling me that in Paradise there is honey, fruit and rivers of milk, yet you don’t give me any of it! Why? Are you waiting for me to die of hunger and go to Paradise before I can partake of your beneficence? No way! Save it! Let me live today and after that, take me wherever you like.

“Come on, man, why don’t you get this Abu Ahmad off my back? Why don’t you send him to America? Is he my destiny? Why do you torture me? I have nothing, except this gallabiyya and this stick. What do you want from me? You either feed me right now, or take me now! Are you going to feed me, or not?”

As Sheikh Ali uttered these words he was in a state of extreme fury; he actually began to froth at the mouth and became soaked with sweat, while his voice filled with fierce hatred. The people of Munyat al-Nasr stood motionless, their hearts almost frozen with fear. They were afraid Sheikh Ali would continue and become blasphemous. But that was not the only thing that scared them. The words spoken by Sheikh Ali were dangerous; they would cause the wrath of God the Almighty, and it would be their village that would pay the price when His vengeance struck everything they owned. Sheikh Ali’s words threatened the safety of the entire village, and so he had to be shut up. In order to do this, some of the village elders began shouting placatory remarks from afar with a view to making Sheikh Ali regain his
ويست، وترك الشيخ علي السماء قليلًا والنفت إليهم:  
- أستك لي بل دون. أستك لما أموت م 11 الجو. أستك لي.  
خافين على بوتك ومصبوح وزرعت. اللحي، حاذل جاء خاف على،  
أما أنا مش خاف على حاج. 11 ان كان زلان مين ياخدني، أنا ودين ما  
أباد ان يهود جد ياخدني انشع الله يكون عزرعتين 11 لمشدش 11 على رأسه  
الحكمدار. وديني ماني ساكت إلا أستك لي مائدة من السماء حالاً. أنا  
مش أقل من مريحة. أنها مهما كانت حرمة، أنا أنا راجل 11. وهي ما أكنت هي  
فكرة، أنا أنا أبو أحمد طلع ديني. وديني وما أباد ماني ساكت إلا أستك  
لي حالاً مائدة.

واللفت الشيخ علي إلى السماء وقال:  
- هو ح حيتها حالا دلفوفي والا ما أخيلي ولا أيقي حيتا إلا ما أقوله  
مائدة حالا. 11 جوز فرها وطرق عسل نحل ورصة عيش ساخن. على شت  
عيش 11 ساخن واقع 11 تسي السلمة. وديني لعاصه لغابة عشة وان ما  
نزلت المائدة ماني ميلي ولا رمي. 11

ومضي الشيخ علي بعد، وقلب مني النصر تعد معه مقدماً والأعصاب  
قد بدأت تتوتر، وأصبح لابد من عمل شيء لياضفة الشيخ علي عند حده.  
واقرح أحدهم أن يبت جمعة من شباب البلدية الأقوياء حوله ويوقعها  
أرضًا، ويكبموها، ويغطوا عفاً لا ينها. غير أن نظرها واحده ألقها  
الشيخ علي من عينيه المشتعلين بالغضب المحتوم أدانت الاقترح. فمن  
المستحيل أن ينالوا الشيخ علي قبل أن يخط هو خيطة أو خيطين برأس  
الحكمدار. وكال شاب قد قدر أن الخيط ستكون من نصيبه، والذي يهدد  
بمشدش رأس عزرعتين كفيف بمشدشة رأس الواحد منهم، وعلى هذا ذاب  
الاقتراح.

وقال أحدهم في فروغ بال:  
- ما أنت طول عمرك جمان يا راجل اشمعني 11 النهاره.
Sheikh Ali’s fiery gaze bored down at him, as he replied: “This time, Abd al-Jawwad, you weakling, my hunger has lasted longer.”

Somebody else shrieked: “Alright then, man, if you were hungry, why didn’t you tell us? We would have fed you instead of listening to your nonsense!”

Sheikh Ali then set upon him: “Me, ask you something? Am I going to beg to you, a village of starving beggars? You’re starving more than I am! Beg you? I have come to ask Him, and if He doesn’t give it to me, I’ll know what to do!

Abd al-Jawwad said: “Why didn’t you work so that you could’ve fed yourself, you wretch?”

At that point, Sheikh Ali’s anger reached its peak. He flew into a temper, quivering and quaking, alternately directing his harangue towards the crowd gathered at a distance, and at the sky: “What’s it to do with you, Abd al-Jawwad, son of Sitt Abuha?! I’m not working! I don’t want to work! I don’t know how to work. I’ve not found work. Is what you do work, you bovine prat?! The work that you do is donkey’s work, and I’m not a donkey! I can’t bust my back all day long; I can’t hang around on the field like cattle, you animals. To hell with all of you! I’m not going to work! By God, if I were meant to die of hunger, I still wouldn’t do the work that you do! Never!”

In spite of the sheikh’s anger and the terrifying nature of the situation, people started laughing.

The sheikh was shaking, and said: “Ha! ... I’ll count to ten and, by God, if I don’t get a dining table, I’ll curse God and do the unspeakable.”

It was clear that Sheikh Ali was not going to change his mind, and that he intended to go ahead with his intentions, which would have unimaginable consequences.

As Sheikh Ali started to count, droplets of sweat poured down people’s foreheads, and the noon heat became intolerable.
الطهر لا يطاق، حتى أن بعضهم تهمس أن النسمة لا بد قد بدأت حول، وأن ذلك الخير الفطير إن هو إلا مقدمة الحريق الهايل الذي سوف يشتبه ويأتي على كل الفهم الواقف والمحتشود، وأخطى أحدهم مرة وقال:
ما نشوفوا لقمة يا وادي ما يمكن بهم.
ويدعو أن الكمية وصلت إلى أدن الشيط علي مع أنه كان يعد بصوته عال مرتفع، فقد استدار إلى الجمع قائلاً:
"لاقمة أبي يا بلد غجر. لقمة من غشخص المعفن وجيتنكم القديمة اللي كلها دود، وده أكل، ودبي ماني ساكت إلا ما نزل في المائدة لغاية هناه، وعليها جوز فراخ.
وسرت همهمة كثيرة في الجمع وقالت لى من الواقفات:
إني طابية شوية بامية حلولين يا خويا اجبم لك صحن.
وصريح فيها الشيط علي:
آخرسيا مرة. بامية أبي يا بلد كلها قرون. دا عقولكو بقت كلها بامية وريحة بلدكو زي ريحه البابية الحامضة.
وقال أبو سرحان:
حدانا سملك صاحب يا شيط علي شاربينه لسه٢٠ من أحمد الصباد.
وزير فيه الشيط علي:
سمك أبي ناعكو٢١ دل اللي قد العقلة يا بلد (صير). هو ده سمك، ودبيني ان ما بعت جوز فراخ والطلبات اللي قلت لك عليها لشام وزي ما يحصل بحصل.
وأصبح الوضع لا يحتمل، إما السقوط وضياع البلد، ومن فيها، وإما إسكات الشيط علي بأي طريقة، وانطلقية مانية تحترأ تعز علي بالنجد، وانطلق صوته مانية مرة يرفس، وصبر على الرفض ويقول:
"ماني قاعد على اللذي يا بلد، بقي لي ثلاث أيامَ ما حذش عزم علي بلقمة، حلبت العزومة دلوتقي، ودبي ماني ساكت إلا ما تيجي المائدة من عند ربنا.

Some started to whisper that the vengeance of God had begun to unfold itself, and that this terrible heat was but the beginning of a terrible conflagration, which would consume all the wheat and crops.

One of them made the mistake of saying: "Why don’t any of you get him a morsel of food, so he’ll come down?"

Although Sheikh Ali was counting loudly, he heard these words and turned around, towards the gathering: "What morsel, you louts? A piece of your rotten bread and stale cheese that has all been eaten by worms? You call that food? I’ll only be quiet if a dining table arrives here, with two chickens on it."

There was a lot of grumbling in the crowd. Suddenly, one of the female bystanders said: "I’ve got a nice okra stew; I’ll bring you a plate of it."

Sheikh Ali shouted at her: "Shut up, woman! What’s this okra nonsense, you ...! Your brains are like okra, and the smell of this village is like that of acid okra!"

Then Abu Sirhan said: "We’ve got some fresh fish, Sheikh Ali, which we’ve just bought from Ahmad the Fisherman."

Sheikh Ali roared: "What’s this miniscule fish of yours, you bunch of minions! Do you call that a fish? Damn it, if He doesn’t send me two chickens and the other things I ordered, I’ll continue cursing – and hang the consequences!"

The situation became unbearable. It was a question of either remaining silent and losing the village and everyone in it, or of shutting up Sheikh Ali by any means possible. A hundred people called out to invite him for lunch, but he refused each time.

Eventually, he said: "I can’t continue with this poverty, people. For three days, no one has offered me even a morsel. So, leave off with the invitations now. I won’t shut up until you give me a dining table full of food sent by the good Lord."
 Heads turned around to enquire who had cooked that day, as not everyone cooked daily; indeed, it would have been highly unlikely for anyone to have meat or chicken. Finally, at Abd al-Rahman’s house they found a rawl of boiled veal, and they took it to Sheikh Ali on a tray together with some radishes, two loaves of crisp bread and onions. They told the sheikh:

“Is that enough for you?”

Sheikh Ali’s eyes alternated between the sky and the tray; when he looked at the sky his eyes gleamed with fire, whereas every time he looked at the tray his anger grew. The onlookers stood by in silence.

Eventually, Sheikh Ali said: “All along I wanted a dining table full of food, you useless lot, and you bring me a tray? And where’s the packet of cigarettes?”

One of the villagers gave him a packet of cigarettes. He stuck out his hand and took a large piece of the meat. He wolfed it down, and said: “And where’s the hash?”

They told him: “How dare you? That’s rich!”

Indignantly, Sheikh Ali said: “Right, that’s it!” Then, he left the food, took off his jelbab and turban and once again started brandishing his stick, threatening that he would start blaspheming again. He would not be silent until they brought him Mandur the hash dealer to give him a lump of hashish.

Mandur said: “Take it. Take it, Sheikh, you deserve it! We didn’t see, we didn’t know you’d be embarrassed to ask. People sit with you and they seem happy, but then afterwards they’re not interested anymore, and leave you. We have to see to your comfort, Sheikh. This is our village, and without you and Abu Ahmad it would be worthless. You make us laugh, and we have to feed you … What do you say to this?”

Sheikh Ali again launched into a raging fury, at the height of which he lunged at Mandur, shaking his stick at him and almost hitting him over the head with it.

“Laughing at me? What is so funny about me, Mandur, you donkey brain? Damn you, and your father!”

واستدارت الرؤوس تسأل عن طبخ في هذا اليوم، إذ إن كل الناس لا يطبخون كل يوم، وإن يكون لدى أحدهم (زراء) أو فراخ بعد حادثاً جللاً، وأخيراً وجدوا عند عبد الرحمن رطل خمسة (ربما) مسأولاً بحالة، فأحضروا على طبلية ... وأحضروا معه فجالاً، جوزين عيش مرحباً، ومخ بصل، وقالوا للشيخ علي:

- يغضبك هه.

وتردد بصرة الشيخ علي بين السماء والطبلية وكلما نظر إلى السماء قدحت عيناه شروياً وكلما نظر إلى الطبلية احتلق وجهه غضباً، والجميع يغمره السكون، وأخيراً نطق الشيخ علي وقال:

- يبقى اني عازر مائدة يا بلد غجر، تخوالي طبلية، وفين علي بالسحاب.

وأعطاه أحدهم صندوق دخانه.

ومد يده وتناول فطاورة كبيرة من اللحم، وقبل أن يتناولها في فمه قال:

- وحثنا المثل ال Francisco ؟

قالوا له: حقة إلا دي.

وهاج الشيخ علي وقال: طب هه. وترك الطعام، وخلع جلبابه وعمامةه وراح يتهز عصاها ويهديه بالكفر من جديد. ولم يستكبد إلا بعد أن أحضروا مندور تاجر المر، وبرع له فصا، وقال له:

- خدنا. قد يا الشيخ مش خسارة فيك، أصلنا ماهدنا نظر، وما كناش عازر اك سركف، تطلب، الناس تقع وياك وينبسط، وعدين ندالدا ودانا وممشي وتسبيع، واحنا لا زلنا نشوف راحك ياشيخ، هي بلدنا من غيرك نت واف احمد تسوي بصلة. أنت تضحكنا واحتا نأكل، اني رايلك في كده؟

وغضب الشيخ علي غضباً شديداً، وطار وراء مندور وهو في قمة الغيظ.

ومضى يجه الحكمار وهو يكاد يهوي بها على رأسه ويقول:

- انا أضحكوا. هو اني مضحكه يا مندور يا ابن البلغه؟ امش داهية تلعنك وتلعن ابن أبوك.
Mandur was running in front of Sheikh Ali, laughing. The bystanders were watching the chase, laughing. Even when the sheikh came after all of them, reviling and cursing them, they kept on laughing.

Sheikh Ali remained in Munyat al-Nasr, and things still happened to him every day. He was still short-tempered, and people continued to laugh at his bouts of anger. However, from that day on they made allowances for him. When they saw him standing in the middle of the threshing floor, taking off his jilbab and turban, grabbing hold of his stick and starting to shake it at the sky, they understood that they had been oblivious to his problem, and had left Abu Ahmad alone with him for longer than was necessary. Before a single blasphemous word left his mouth, a tray would be brought to him with everything he asked for. Occasionally, he would accept his lot, with resignation.
Language Notes

1. العجلة من الشيطان والصبر من الزُّجََحَم ("haste is of the Devil, patience is divine").
2. "siren" (ECA); MSA نَفْثُ نُبِيي ("sirene").
3. "car" (ECA); MSA سيارة "car". Note that this word also means "cart" (both in ECA and MSA), whereas the usual word for "car" in ECA is عربي or عربي.
4. بوليس النجدة (النَّظُرة) (lit. "emergency police") may be compared to the civil defence in that it is a special section of the police force on hand to help in case of emergencies. Note that the النجدة...النَّظُرة means "Help! Help!".
5. الزُّحَد: (ECA) a blueing agent (for laundry). Cf. ECA زَهْرِي "blue". The word زَهْرِي can also, of course, mean "rose" (as it does in MSA).
6. جلاب (pl. جَلابِي) "a loose, robe-like garment. Interestingly enough, the author chooses to use this term rather than the ECA جلاب (pl. جَلابِي جَلابِي), as it is this quintessentially Egyptian male dress the protagonist is wearing.
7. سَبِير (ECA); cf. MSA سَبِير or سَبِير. In ECA, the prefix ح ("to go") is added to the imperfect (مِضْرَع) to denote the future aspect (often implying intention). It is also used interchangeably with رأي (which has the feminine and plural forms رأي and رأى, respectively) for "somebody wishes to", or رأي or رأي (which has the feminine and plural forms رأي and رأى, respectively) for "somebody wishes to", or رأى. In ECA, this means "We’re going to write".
8. "owl" (ECA); cf. MSA نَحْر (coll.). In contradistinction to European lore, the owl is associated with highly negative symbolism (stupidity, untrustworthiness) in Arab culture, and it is referred to as غَرَاب النَّيل ("night crow")
9. الأوْلَوُر: (ECA وَعَر) or Fr. vapeur, "steam") in ECA, as in a number of other dialects, this word can have a variety of meanings, e.g. "steam engine" (MSA هُوكُ بُخاري), "steamship" (MSA بُخار (MSA by باخرة), "locomotive" (MSA قاطرة.
10. (ECA < Turkish بُكْمِد, pl. حكمة (G) denotes anyone in executive authority (e.g. chief of state, school prefect).
11. الأُلْوِر: one of the most ancient universities and undoubtedly the most famous mosque-university in the Islamic world.
12. (ECA) this refers to the number of genuflections (also see حكاية القديم (the faithful have to perform in prayer. In this case, as it is the Friday prayers (i.e. the prayers performed in the mosque at midday), it should have been two (whereas it is four for ordinary midday prayers performed at home).
13. خَلَفُ بالطلاق (lit. "to swear by divorce"); a strong oath, the use of which is not restricted to marital issues! It reflects the highly negative connotation attached to divorce in Muslim culture.
14. (pl. أميدة (Anfida) originally an Ottoman title and honorific for various dignitaries, in Egypt it is a term/reference of address used for all persons with a certain standard of literacy.
15. الخَلَاز (النهاهر) a sweetmeat made of honey and containing sesame seeds, nuts, rosewater, etc. (the English word "halva" is, of course, derived from the Arabic خَلَاز).
16. جُرْوَكَ الله كُل خُِّبُر (lit. "May God reward you with everything that is good") and زِنِّي يَحْزِرْكَ (lit. "May our Lord reward you").
17. ما (pronounced "ehe") "what" (ECA < CA أيَّ "what", "which"), MSA ماذا.
18. النَّهْار. The ECA word is derived from the النَّهْار ("day", as opposed to "night") and the demonstrative ده ("this").
19. شعور الأسلاف, note No 10.
20. "I left it" (ECA 0, "to leave") MSA تُرْكْ مهمة.
21. "because" (ECA < CA على 3عد "on those grounds")
22. "a bit, more or less" (ECA < CA diminutive of, "thing")
23. "the invariable relative pronoun in ECA (and indeed in the overwhelming majority of colloquial varieties). It
means "not like that".
36. "this" (ECA masculine demonstrative); cf. MSA 
37. "why" (ECA, pronounced leh); MSA 
38. "otherwise" (ECA < CA) 
39. "nice words"; this is an example of a sound 
40. "smashing", ECA < CA or MSA 
41. "to smash, shatter"); 
42. "you weren't"; ECA split negative (ما كانت + ش + ي) 
43. "two", "a pair" (ECA) MSA 
44. "a couple", "set of 
45. " Aren't you [m.] coming with us?"
46. "bread" (ECA), MSA 
47. "watch it, you!"; masc. imperative of "to heed", "bear in mind"). Cf. MSA 
48. "hungry" (ECA); MSA 
49. "why" (this one and not another one) (ECA); MSA 
50. "lit. "dyed in safflower").
51. "right" (ECA); MSA 
52. "we" (ECA); MSA 
53. "you", m. pl. (ECA); MSA 
54. "coming"; ECA present participle or 
55. "came", "to come"; 
56. "he didn't give me"; ECA split negative
References

The stories collected here are by leading authors of the short story form in the Middle East today. In addition to works by writers already well-known in the West, such as Idwār al-Kharrāṭ, Fu’ād al-Takarli and Nobel Prize winner Najīb Maḥfūẓ, the collection includes stories by key authors whose fame has hitherto been restricted to the Middle East.

This bilingual reader is ideal for students of Arabic as well as lovers of literature who wish to broaden their appreciation of the work of Middle Eastern writers. The collection features stories in the original Arabic, accompanied by an English translation and a brief author biography, as well as a discussion of context and background. Each story is followed by a glossary and discussion of problematic language points.

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