



جائزة الشيخ زايد للكتاب  
Sheikh Zayed Book Award

# Translated Excerpts of Sheikh Zayed Book Award Winning Titles

Literature, Young Author  
and Children's Books



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Recognizing Creativity

تقدير لكل مبدع

The Sheikh Zayed Book Award honours the outstanding achievements of innovators and thinkers in literature, the arts and humanities in Arabic and other languages. Launched in 2007 and covering nine categories, the award promotes creativity, advances Arabic literature and culture, and provides new opportunities for Arabic-language writers.

Authors writing about Arab culture and civilisation in English, French, German, Italian, Spanish and Russian are also recognised by the award. In addition to honouring writers and their publishers, the award addresses the important role that translators play in helping to bridge the cultural and literary gap between Arab and non-Arab readers and authors.

Open to any individual contributing to the region's cultural development, the award categories include: Contribution to the Development of Nations, Children's Literature, Young Author, Translation, Literature, Literary and Art Criticism, Arab Culture in Other Languages, Publishing and Technology, and Cultural Personality of the Year (individual and organisation). Each award category has its own judging panel that is comprised of three to five distinguished regional and international literary figures.

This booklet features translations into English of winning titles from the three awards of Literature, Young Author and Children's Literature.



# Sheikh Zayed Book Award

## Translated Excerpts of Winning Titles

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# *In the Footsteps of Enayat Al-Zayyat* by Iman Mersal



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Iman Mersal is an Egyptian poet, writer, academic and translator. She works as an Associate professor of Arabic literature and Middle Eastern studies at the University of Alberta, Canada and currently resides in Marseille, France, where she holds the

Albert Camus chair at IMÉRA, the Institute for Advanced Study of Aix-Marseille University until July 2021, while working on a book entitled *al-Laknah: al-Sawt fi Ghair Makaneh* (Accent: the Displaced Voice). An anthology of her works was translated into more than twenty languages and she has five poetry collections published. Her most recent published works include *Hatta Atakhlla 'An Fikrat al-Biyut* (Until I Abandon the Idea of Homes) in 2013, *Kayfa Taltaem: 'An Umuma wa Ashbahuha* (How to Amend: On Motherhood and its Ghosts) in 2017, and *Fi Athar Enayat Al-Zayyat* (In the Footsteps of Enayat Al-Zayyat) in 2019. Her book, *Mamar Mu'atim Yasluh fi Ta'alum al-Raqs* (A Dark Path Suitable for Learning to Dance), is one of the most important poetry books issued by the generation of the nineties in Arabic poetry.

## *About the Book*

In this book, the author embarks on a journey that traces the life of late Egyptian writer Enayat Al-Zayyat, who died tragically in the 1960s. A multi-genre work, the book uses storytelling, research, investigative journalism and other techniques to tell the story of the late author, while combining biographical and autobiographical insights to provide readers with a balanced critical look at Al-Zayyat's life and writing. The book transcends traditional genderial constraints to tell a story through creativity, written record and history. This is a renewed visit to a feminist experience re-introduced with great integrity and within a coherent narrative. Published by Al Kotob Khan, 2019. ISBN: 9789778031027. 244 pages.

An excerpt from

## *In the Footsteps of Enayat Al-Zayyat*

### ONE

BUT PAULA hadn't gone to the funeral. She didn't know where the grave was. Then she repeated the story I'd heard from her before; the same details in the same order:

That after receiving the phone call she had gone to Midan Astra in Doqqi, to the apartment there, bounding up the stairs to the second floor.

That it had been true what she'd been told: they had broken down the bedroom door searching for her.

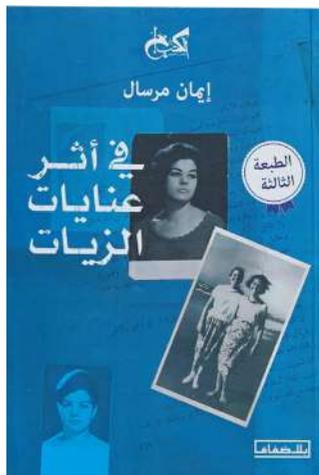
That she had seen her stretched out on the bed, beautiful, as though peacefully asleep, the blanket laid over her smooth and neat.

"A final decision, no going back. Such resolve she had. She wasn't playing." Paula had lost her mind, swearing at the sleeping woman, beating her hands against the walls. Then she had left the apartment. And hadn't gone to the funeral.

At eight in the morning, February 19, 2015, I commended myself to God and caught a taxi to Basateen. All I had to go on was the address that the Al Ahram newspaper had printed back in January 1967:

*In memory of the late Enayat Al Zayyat, with hearts full of patience and faith, the family is holding a memorial service which shall not be forgotten, at the tomb of the late Rashid Pasha in Al Afifi.*

Something about these lines itched at me. I wanted to edit them. Say . . . *the family will hold a memorial service today for she who shall not be forgotten at the tomb of the late Rashid Pasha, Al Afifi.*



Finding this passage among the death notices, I had been sure that there must be more stories, in the memories of those still alive, in books and on the shelves of public archives. That all I need do was be patient. And now, years after I'd first chanced across this clipping, reverently preserving it as though it were Enayat's identity card, and following the series of telephone conversations with Paula the previous autumn, I still had no idea who Rashid Pasha was, nor anything about his relationship to Enayat. I didn't even know his first name.

Was he from an Egyptian family, or Turkish? Was he Circassian? Nothing.

One of those nineteenth-century pashas, was my guess: men who strutted about with their entourages, sauntering through the palaces and vast estates granted them by Mohammed Ali; whose legacy was the mausoleums which bear their names.

I found four men from that period with the name Rashid Pasha:

The first candidate was a Turkish diplomat by the name of Mustafa Rashid Pasha, born in Istanbul and buried there in 1858. Jurji Zeidan dedicates a chapter to him in his book, *Lives of the Great Men of the Orient in the Nineteenth Century*.

Second was Rashid Pasha Al Kouzlaki, originally from Kyrgyzstan, who was appointed Wali of Baghdad by the Ottoman Sultan in 1853 after leading a military campaign to crush a Kurdish rebellion in northern Mesopotamia, only to be buried there just four years later in the Al Khayzuram Cemetery behind the dome of Abu Hanifa Al Noman's mausoleum. It was just conceivable that one of his sons was buried in Al Affi.

The third Rashid Pasha had an interesting story. A Circassian who spoke Arabic with an accent, he is mentioned in Ilyas Al Ayoubi's history of the military force dispatched by Khedive Ismail to invade Abyssinia. Rashid Pasha went south on the steamship Dakahlia with the other commanders, reaching Massawa on December 14, 1875.

Al Ayoubi gives a description of an on-board Babel: the commander-in-chief of the campaign, Ratib Pasha, was Turkish, his chief-of-staff Major-General Loring was American, while the rest of the officers were a mix of Turks, Circassians, Americans, Austrians and Germans, along with an Italian convert to Islam and a Sudanese man.

Al Ayoubi says that the Turks and Circassians, Ratib Pasha and Rashid Pasha among them, conspired—though they themselves had no experience of combat—to withhold their cooperation from Loring and frustrate his

plans. The ensuing chaos was brought to an end by the arrival of the Ethiopian forces at the Egyptian-held fort in Gura on March 7, 1876, and their crushing victory. Some 3,273 Egyptians were killed and 1,416 were wounded. Only 530 escaped the battle unscathed.

Rashid Pasha was killed in the fighting. As he lay in his own blood, Abyssinian soldiers stripped his body of its finery, dividing the haul among themselves, then castrated him before moving off to continue the slaughter. Meaning that Rashid was buried, if he was buried at all, in Ethiopia:

*The dead were buried in the wadi and the stream beds, writes Al Ayoubi. There were almost two thousand of them, and they were not interred properly, for the rains soon washed the topsoil from their corpses and the wild beasts fed on their flesh.*

It was my secretly held wish that this was not Enayat's Rashid.

The final Rashid Pasha came from a family with close ties to Mohammed Ali. His name first enters the record in the 1850s on a list of officials charged with digging canals, draining marshland, and reclaiming desert land for agriculture. By 1868 he was governor of Cairo. He was among the founders of the Egyptian Geographic Society in 1875 and a year later he joined what was then known as the Privy Council where he headed the precursor of the Ministry of Finance. From January 1878 to April 1879, he was Speaker of the last parliamentary sessions to be held in the reign of Khedive Ismail.

There is almost no information about his origins or life outside of these facts, though in 1868 we find him registered as a member of the Society of Knowledge, which would place him, in Al Rafai's words, *among the best classes in society.*

To take the tone of a *policier*, it looked like this was the Rashid Pasha I wanted. If he turned out to be the owner of the tomb where Enayat lay, then I would return to him for sure, but first, I needed to see it for myself.

The driver took Salah Salem Street as far Midan Sayyida Aisha, where he turned right, dropping me off a few minutes later at a narrow opening in a wall that ran next to the road.

"Ask here," he said. "There's a thousand can show you the way."

Through the entrance and down a ruler-straight street: to my right a high wall with sections of black corrugated iron and to my left the entrances to the tombs dressed in a fresh coat of yellow. I saw a little girl trotting towards me. She wore a violet robe with flounces in tiers, loaves slumped across the lattice of palm fronds that she balanced on her head. The sight of her was so compelling that I longed to take a picture and wished I had a tourist's audacity.



The girl walked past me, then the scrape of her sandals stopped abruptly and I turned to find her standing and staring. Our eyes met. Did she know where Al Afifi was? “Man or street?” She was older than I’d first thought. I took a couple of steps towards her and asked the way to the bakery. She described the route precisely.

It wasn’t as crowded there as I had anticipated and I felt eyes on me. A woman asked what I was after, and as we were trying to figure out whether Al Afifi was a street or an alley, a gentleman seated on the ground, sunning himself and smoking, remarked:

“She’ll be one of those newspaper people, come to take photos and fuck off.”

Politely, as though I hadn’t heard, I asked him if he knew where I might find the tomb of Rashid Pasha in Al Afifi. “There are no Afifis here, but there’s Abou Aouf’s court. I’ll take you if you want.”

So, I told myself, better I find my own way. Next time I ask, I should ask for a court not a tomb. And if I don’t find Enayat today, she will send me a sign when she’s ready.

I wandered aimlessly, peering through the entrances to these courts and up at the family names over their entrances. Though I didn’t mean to spy, every step I took delivered me scenes from their interiors. I was in a strange mood. Not frustrated exactly, because Enayat had taught me over the years that nothing about her came easily. Nor did the beauty of these tombs inspire any clear sense of sadness in me or moral judgements on the living occupants who disturbed the rest of the dead. I couldn’t remember which of my friends had once described his mood as “pins and needles”, but it fit perfectly.

Around me, the living were asleep and waking, eating and bickering and breeding. Ugly to see and painful—a scene better not seen at all—yet at the same time, strong evidence of the will to live, of resolution. Passing by the carved names, the bedrooms and kitchens and washing tubs standing open and spilling to the street, the electric cables strung tight across Kufic calligraphy (*And every soul shall taste death*) my initial shock shaded into familiarity. Cacti next to dried flowers next to mounds of rubbish; the smell of piss and garlic frying in oil. Barefoot children ran about, one wearing an Adidas T-shirt. A gas range set on a grave. A washing line slung from tree trunk to marble headstone. Mayada Al Hennawy singing, “I adore you...” And, despite the chill, a knot of men smoking beneath a tree that fronted a beautifully worked green iron gate, every one of them in underwear—white shorts

and vests and nothing else besides—as though lounging by some invisible seashore.

And as I went, my mind began to wander with me. A memory of the last time I'd been to the cemetery in Basateen. It was back in 1995: not a funeral—a wedding; whose I don't know, but Sheikh Yassin Al Tohamy had sung. That night it had seemed the most beautiful place in the world. A summer breeze, the distant lights from the top of Muqattam's cliff-face, strangers holding out hands that held fat joints, and the rasp of Al Tohamy's voice: "What good be there in love if it should spare the heart..." I had floated motionless for hours, that extraordinary sensation of being cut off from both past and present. Not of going away, exactly, not of travelling, but rather that you're flown, a flight which ends with the end of the night.

The day after my walkabout, I had a taxi drop me off on Sixteen Street. I passed the shoppers and the sellers, the pavement and the walls of the courts covered with goods for sale, with every conceivable kind of scrap and appliance: video players and washing machines and gas bottles, window frames and bedsteads in wood and iron, aluminium cabinets and broken chairs and car tyres, the empty bottles that once had held quality whiskey and vodka. A marketplace for the waste disgorged by the city's guts.

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I turned off one side street into another, then another, then I began to hear my own footsteps, and then there was no one around me. As though I'd stepped into the outskirts of the City of the Dead.

There was great tomb like a castle, barred against invaders by the huge locks which hung from its gate. Through the gate's railings I could make out cactuses and well-tended flowers. I imagined the members of that lucky family stepping out from their burial chamber bedrooms at dawn to gather in the courtyard and talk.

Children squabbling brought me out of my reverie. One of them was wearing a T-shirt with *Adidas* across the front. Surely not the same child I'd seen the day before. "Adidas among the tombs," came the thought, and all of a sudden I was remembering a relative of mine, a classmate back in primary school who had ended up as a construction worker in Cairo. One of the most intensely pious people I've ever known: gentle with his family, prays the five prayers daily and goes into seclusion for the last ten days of Ramadan. He has never hurt a soul and, to me, is the model of what a true Muslim should be. I once saw him, dapper and handsome, wearing a T-shirt on which were written these words in English: *The right to choose – It's my body*. God knows where he'd got it, but it was the slogan of some organisation overseas which advocated for abortion rights. I'd been unsure. Should

I tell him? Did he have the right to know? A moral quandary which I had settled inside a minute: I hadn't said a word, and now I felt guilty.

My journey ended seated at what appeared to be a kind of café at the entrance to a tomb: red plastic chairs loosely gathered beneath an ancient tree. I was at peace, as though this little stand of chairs had always been my destination. I ordered a tea, then changed my mind and asked for a bottle of water.

"We don't have bottled water. Would you like a Pepsi, miss?"

"Yes please."

A man seated beside me smiled my way, and I greeted him, and asked him if he knew the area well.

"I've lived here going on forty years."

We chatted for a while. Emboldened, I lit myself a cigarette and another for him.

He wanted to know why I'd come. I told him that I was looking for a street, for an alley perhaps, called Al Afifi.

"There's no Al Afifi here," he said. "It must be in Basateen, or the Mameluke cemetery."

"But aren't we in Basateen?"

So I must have come further than I'd thought.

I had once read that this stretch of desert was the site where the Mamelukes would hold their military parades, their rites and races, their feats of arms and religious feasts; that they had chosen to be buried here because it was so dry. Amid these miles of walls and doors, ramrod avenues and evergreen trees, outsiders quickly lose their way. Historical periods tangle, interleaving their walis and pashas, their mosques and palaces, the shrines of their saints. There are no signs to mark boundaries in the City of the Dead.

I meant to resume my search the next day, convinced I must be very close to finding Enayat's grave.

But this was naive. I would finally locate Rashid Pasha's tomb in the summer of 2018, only to learn that this tomb was not the end of the trail. Enayat's resolve, it seemed, was as strong as Paula had claimed. As though she were watching over every moment of my journey and wanted me to reach her by some other road.

*Translated by Robin Moger*

Winner of the Sheikh Zayed Book Award  
for Literature 2020

# The Penultimate Cup

## by Moncef Ouhaibi

Moncef Ouhaibi, born in 1949 in Tunisia, is Professor of Arabic Literature at the Universities of Kairouan and Sousse and a permanent member of the Tunisian Academy of Sciences, Letters and Arts. He has published numerous poetry books in both Arabic and French, as well as writing short films and documentaries, notably *En attendant Averroès* (Waiting for Averroès), *Paul Klee à Hammamet* (Paul Klee in Hammamet), *Devant les portes de Kairouan* (Before the gates of Kairouan) and *Pays qui me ressemble* (Country that looks like me), which has been translated into several languages. He has been nominated for several prizes including the Comar



d'Or literary prize, the Okaz Poet award for Arab poetry, and the Nikos Gatsos literary prize.

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### About the Collection

*The Penultimate Cup* includes sixty poems of various lengths, subject matter and themes, with their aspects ranging through the philosophical, the historical, the metaphysical, the aesthetic, the linguistic and the rhythmic. The cup in the title, and in one of the poems, may symbolize the infinite and the constant hope for new life, new horizons and new poetry that is completely open. The poems are as open to life and the real world as they are to the past and to tradition. They address humanity and dig into the emotional depths of humanity. They address collectivity and pose multiple questions on its behalf. As a whole the poems in the collection create a space with multiple identities, eastern and western, Arab and international, a space where cultures have cross-fertilised throughout history and continue to do so.

Published by Meskeliani Publishing and Distribution, Tunisia, 2019.  
ISBN 9789938240757, 420 pages.

*A poem from*

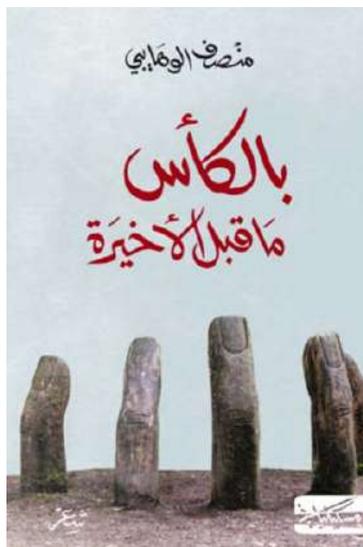
## *The Penultimate Cup*

### A Field of Watermelons, Harvested by the Stars A History of the Arabs

For the caravans of the Soninke African  
Amazigh Saracen Arabs, the gypsies of  
the age,

at the gates to every town and citadel,  
as I retrace their history and take in  
their words – from al-Kindi's House of  
Wisdom to the traces of Khawla's  
encampment.

I have a scout's walking stick to stop the  
sand cutting off our ruins from theirs. I  
plant it in the sand and in a wind like  
the blast from a furnace. I cast my shadow over it. With it I jump over  
waters and turn words over, as one turns embers in a fire. I release the  
words from their promise and I set my rhythm to the metre of their poetry,  
to the last palm tree rotting in the water and the sky turns in the folds of  
their blueness and in their green mirror. (And things are more beautiful  
when they rot or change). Where the salt in the desert was ice, it may have  
confused me about the tracks and passes, had I not had my own language,  
and words as my horses, I would have said that this, the land portrayed,  
from close and from afar, was their land – from Ptolemy's *Geographia* to  
Ibn Hawqal's book on routes, realms, deserts and wastelands, when he  
roamed around Byzantium and the Caucasus, and travelled by night from  
Baghdad till the rays of the sun rose, one sun for each land, and on to Ibn  
Khaldoun's *Prologemena*, where he chronicles decline, looking out from  
Tazghout. All he can see is the plains, the plains of Oran, to the markets of



Biskra and Meknes, and the gates of Africa, to the race tracks there in the markets of Cadiz. There we loaded onto our horses all the prizes for nobility, and all the prizes for slavery. As far as Gaul and Greece, to Giorgione absorbed in his painting *The Gypsy Woman and the Soldier* in Rome, and Scarlatti's music and organ; and melodies as decorative as our women.

\*\*\*

Moros y cristianos

Christians' rice and we are the Muslims' beans  
Together we were born or will yet be born beyond the city walls, in hay carts or on a train  
or a ship (Noah's ark) or boats that cross the mountainous waves of the Mediterranean.

We are the peddlers of suitcases and brooms, spoons and coat hooks. We are horse traders, grooms and guards in the stables. We are the makers of medical equipment and feeding troughs. The makers of shovels we are, makers of tables and chairs and blankets we are, makers of baskets, grape pickers, the ones who press wine for kings and wash their gold.

We have inns and taverns on the highways, we do. We have fish and fruit, wine aged in goatskin bags, or salted caviar, slices of spicy pork. We have hay, barley for horses, our horses. We lay on performing bear shows and preserve our genealogies, and our mother was a slave girl to Abraham. We are the sons of the Nile, the nomads of Nejd, the descendants of Qahtan, the Lakhmids of Iraq, the Ghassanids of Syria, the Muslims of Granada who converted to Christianity and were baptized (hiding their circumcision under their striped silk underwear), merchants of the river basin in Senegal, brigands, robbers of pilgrims in the markets of Mecca, traders in buckets and atlases of wells in the desert.

In Chinguetti, we are slave traders, those who kidnap the women of the land of bananas and the houris of Oualata: gold, coins, silver in the hair, on chests and in noses. At the feasts of the Soninke women's bodies we steal the women's eyelashes. We turn blackberries into apples. From alchemy we have fire and from the sweet part of noxious ore we have quicksilver to fashion bracelets and earrings for them. We are the currency forgers in Madrid or Rome, the money changers and brokers: the streets and the alleys are our bourse. We have nowhere to go – thieves of the night and

daylight robbers.

(Beside the granaries my father calls out to my brother:

“Bolt the door, you son of a bitch. Don’t forget.” Darkness was falling but the lantern man hadn’t brought us oil in his jar that night, and they hadn’t lit the village squares for us.)

\*\*\*

Laid low by pretty women, wine and Indian hemp,  
with the foxes and the wolves,  
with the storks and the cranes,  
we drink toasts.

We weep like them at times and like them we sing the songs of the Aleppan  
goat at times,

we laugh like them at times.

These vineyards are ours, and so are the peas and the women in them.

And the women standing on the road, on the pavement, are our women,  
reading our fortunes for us.

\*\*\*

The night closed in on me in Galera. The cloak was the shadow of her nakedness, and the cloak was the weight of the shadow. She gave me two lips, frail in their blackness. She gave me some fledglings, still young, shedding their first feathers. I was about to reach for them, and I almost did, but . . .

Beneath the wall figs grew in Granada. When I was young I used to climb down to pick them slowly, and climb back up, my mouth full of fig milk all for you, my lady queen. You were mine, the feathers itching to emerge from under your skin. And to me the saliva of the fruit was like the down of a fledgling.

And the Virgin Mary’s bird, about to take flight, on a leather patch by the door to her mosque.

The singing was mine. Love after death is like death after love. It was the third, the excluded middle.

Who is that Soninke stranger then? Is it me?

(My name is Mamadi Safid because in Ouagadougou I fell in love with the beautiful Yatabare; her dowry was the python Bida. Every year the most

beautiful Soninke woman was sacrificed to it. In his eyes, two white eyes were on fire, or maybe two eggs? I've forgotten. He had seven heads and I tore them all off. I'd have forgotten were it not for my riddle in Bambari: "we have a field of watermelons, harvested by the stars".)

In the kaleidoscope, we are free men and bastards, pirates and soldiers, heretics and a mixture of riffraff, mulattos, noblemen, poets and foundlings. Kind, generous and passionate. We may be in love and not be in love. As innocent as the dead we are, and murderers, and murderers may return to the place, but we do not. In Madrid and Catalonia we are ghosts white and black, Greeks and Arabs, barbers, tailors, weavers, coachmen, tinsmiths, builders, coppersmiths, blacksmiths, sculptors, reciters of *zajal*.

I, a pirate sailing the Mediterranean at twenty,  
chained to the oar at fifty, day and night, in the fleet, in Iberia and the Atlantic, fastening the planks together with fibre ropes.

My hands shackled behind my back

*Triatto di corda*

strung up by the wrists in the squares of Milan and Turin. Heaven is very far away.

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In Transylvania, I am György Dózsa, the rebel peasant.

*György Dózsa*

My people are the gypsies of Timișoara. They made us a throne, a crown, and a sceptre of iron.

They fanned their fire with their bellows and savoured my flesh to the rhythm of a viol.

I am in Andalusia

*El Tuzaní de la Alpujarra*

The Lord of Alpujarras, I have Berja and Gabia, in silver hills that are our high wall.

Castile and Granada are mine, as are the green lowlands between them.

From a small window in Boabdil's tower in Alhambra, I look towards Castile. His horsemen were waiting at the gate, the wheat was ripening on the plains. In the glare of the sun the horsemen were like the buzzing of bees in two beams of light, which streamed from north to south and from south to north, like us, the Moriscos.

In Garcilaso's works

and in "The Siege of Santa Fe the town", I wore their uniform.

In the masque plays, I saw my head at the tips of my people's spears.

In Valencia, I danced on tiptoes,  
in a tapestry of wool.

In Evora, on the Atlantic coast, I sang for you in the plays of Gil Vicente  
and put our horses up for sale, proudly, to a Fado tune played on the white  
keys of the piano.

In Granada, to the rhythm of hammer and bellows, we awoke our  
ancestors, the eaters of stones, who were gathered in the hollowed cave  
around Sacromonte,

by the deserted brick kilns, precious and malign.

This flamenco is “the sound of spurting blood” to us, my sad song  
*cante jondo*

Their castles lit up for them, the Nasrids, when we crossed the river Darro  
in structures made of bark, hemp and wicker, drawn by oxen and women.  
We followed behind on foot.

1492: Columbus sets off to his new world (America, our empirical god).  
And we were setting off for Africa.

Our time had not yet come. We aged and died.

We awaken words in a language that sleeps deep in the bliss of oblivion.  
From its corpse its voice still rises, from al-Kindi’s House of Wisdom, from  
the remains of Khawla’s encampment.

So be it . . .

We Saracen Amazigh African and Soninke people,  
at the gates to every town or citadel, in every sea or desert,  
we have the poetry of herdsmen,  
and we have seven arts, the eighth of which is death, which tames them  
for us.

Now even Noah’s ark, anchored with us in Ayn Warda,

We make holes in it and descend

we and the animals

blacks and whites

hand in hand together

a couple of each

We dive into the mountainous waves

and emerge naked into life.

*Translated by Huda Fakhreddine and Jonathan Wright*

Winner of the Sheikh Zayed Book Award  
for Literature 2019

# *The Self – Between Existence and Creation*

by *Bensalem Himmich*

16



Born in Meknes, Morocco, in 1945, Bensalem Himmich is a novelist, poet, essayist, professor of philosophy, and a former Minister of Culture for Morocco. With a PhD in Philosophy from the University of Paris, and writing in both Arabic and French, a number of his works have been translated into several other languages. The Egyptian Writers' Union selected his novel *Majnoun Al-Hukm (The Theocrat)* as one of the 100 best novels of the 20th Century, and another novel, *Mu'adhdhibati (My Torturers)*, was shortlisted for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction. Himmich received the grand award of the French Academy of Toulouse in 2011.

## *About the Book*

This work is far more than the straightforward autobiography its title seems to suggest; instead it diffuses the author's life into its literary, intellectual, linguistic, and cultural dimensions. It opens with a discussion on autobiographical writing per se, citing earlier examples, in Arabic and other languages, and reflects on the genre's problematics. The first chapter recounts the author's life. Subsequent chapters move mainly into the domain of creation, with four categories reflecting the author's many interests and concerns: literary, intellectual, linguistic, and cultural. The penultimate chapter, "My Polemics" opens with a survey of intellectual controversies in Islamic history, before offering four of his own polemical stands. In the last chapter the author reflects on the emergence of a new and negative kind of cultural "hegemony".

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*An excerpt from*

*The Self –*

*Between Existence and Creation*

DURING THE first and second phases of my secondary education, coinciding with my adolescence and early youth, it never even occurred to me that one day I might become a writer. All my father knew about the written dimension was memorization and copying, and my elder brother, as a student of mechanical engineering, could only envisage a future that involved “serious professions”, things that could benefit the country and its people. There’s just one single occasion through which I have glimpsed something tying me to the act of writing. That was when I composed a six-page religious sermon. I presented it to my father so that he could deliver it from his pulpit as the Friday homilist. While he expressed his admiration for what I had written, he nevertheless declined to carry out my wishes, not merely because it was the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs that provided the text for homilists in both form and content, but also because he had his doubts as to whether it was actually my own work; he assumed that I had plagiarized it from the contents of his books. He stuck to his doubts even though I swore a solemn oath that it contained my very own ideas and was my own composition. Later on, how much I came to regret losing not only that text, but also the story “There’s no sea in Meknes”, in which I imitated the format of Ghada Samman’s story “There’s no sea in Beirut”.



My first connection with writing – what I have earlier termed “creativity” was poetry. I have lost most of it, with the exception of a single text which became the core of the first collection that I published later, entitled *Notebook, what do you have to say?* It was something new, since I wrote it calligraphically in my own hand. It was followed by another collection of the same kind, entitled *Revolt of Winter and Summer*. Other poets followed the same pattern, with some of them claiming that they were pioneers in using the style, even though publication dates show their claims to be false. Thereafter, I stopped using that mode, as the art of printing developed and the shaping and patterning of words became that much easier. When this experimental phase came to an end, I continued to compose poetry, mostly in Arabic, but some in French. In subsequent years I published six collections of poetry, even though the market for poetry was poor, and, as the saying has it, “good and bad were mingled”. The late poet Mahmoud Darwish was right when he said “there are many poets, but little poetry” and “please save us from this kind of poetry”.

18 Soon afterward, I became very involved in a kind of fragmentary writing, segmented and asymmetrical, something based on the production of surprising significance that aims to have both a profound effect and gentle impact by using short, terse words. That kind of writing finds its historical underpinnings in poetry, Qur’anic verses, *hadith*, wisdom literature, and fantasy, and even perhaps in calligraphy, mosaics, and arabesque. I adopted the style in my collection, *The Book of Wound and Wisdom*, and critics were of the opinion that my contribution was both excellent and original.

★ ★ ★

During this phase in my life, I continued to bolster and forward my own educational level by creating for myself a framework that would stimulate hard work and serious study. It consisted of a hut on the flat roof, somewhere with no frills and no noise. As time went by, the hut was extended till it looked like a large bower where I could enjoy the cheeps and songs of birds – except for the doves whose mourning calls I could not stand. I told my friend Abdellatif, the cat-exterminator, about the problem, and he rigged up for me two scarecrows over the hut and bower, coated the wood surfaces in glue, and gave me a whistle to scare away the doves. That done, I could relax and enjoy myself reading the texts written by prose writers and poets, Arabs and non-Arabs.

When it comes to friendships, there is another unforgettable name: Hajj

Idris al-Nasiri, who made the pilgrimage to Mecca before he was twenty years old. He came from a wealthy family, and was kind, generous, mild-tempered, liberal, and good company. For me, he was the first person in whom I discovered the true sense and value of friendship. How can I possibly forget him, when he would provide me with books from his deceased father's library, and for the amazing way he would fill a basket with them, duly accompanied by varieties of fruit, which he would lower on a rope from the high wall of his house across to my little retreat on the roof? No sooner had I emptied the basket of its contents – books and fruit – and put a note of thanks in it than he would lift it back up to his own house without my even setting eyes on him. He would keep doing this whenever he could, and, whenever we met, I would thank him profusely. "I'm the one who should be thanking you," he would tell me. "You're the one saving my father's legacy from ruin, since it has nothing to do with my studies in physics and mathematics." He never failed to make clear to me that the books he was giving me were a gift; there was no question of giving them back. So that was how I came to read some works by Mustafa Lutfi al-Manfaluti, Gibran Khalil Gibran, Naguib Mahfouz, Taha Hussein, Tawfiq al-Hakim, Abdelmajid Benjelloun, and 'Abd al-Karim Ghallab. All Hajj Idris wanted from me was to spend some time with him, conversing in French and correcting his mistakes and infelicities.

Nor did I ever forget that I also had a personal obligation, one I regularly fulfilled with my friends in the quarter and at school. On Saturdays and Sundays, our activities would vary: they would involve, in turn, swimming, going to cinemas, and visits to the central square in the city where clowns, monkey-trainers, and snake-charmers would ply their trades. And especially storytellers, some of whose opening calls I can still remember: "Come on, friends, come and listen!" "Join me in prayers to the Prophet!" . . . They would then start telling the tales of 'Antar, our Lord 'Ali, Sayf ibn Dhi Yazan, Sindbad the Sailor, the westward migration of the Bani Hilal, and many others.

But the lion's share of our activities involved football games which were usually played on a special field in the city centre. I had the good fortune to be the centre forward and primary goal scorer. Penalty kicks were fairly rare, except when a player got injured or sent off. As a result, physical strength was the most important currency and aggressive reserve for every team. I would use my bodily skill to control the ball and work round the opposing team as I headed for the net and scored the goal. Once in a while I was helped by having purchasing the referee's good will with a bribe (or

a “sweetener”, as we used to call it). It would involve him turning a blind eye to a totally unfair move in which I was involved; when members of the opposite team drew his attention to it, he would swear a solemn oath he had not seen it. Occasionally, when the match was a tense one, fierce fights used to break out, broken up only by the arrival of the police. These unusual games came back to me recently, with some differences: in my novel, *Mu‘adhdhibati (My Torturess)* there is a chapter, “Prisoners’ Football Game”, that takes place in a criminal prison. It consists of one continuous half, with no extra time, no stopping for goal kicks, no time outs. Goals may be counted, but victory belongs to the team that stays patient, resisting, never acknowledging defeat, and never withdrawing . . .

Something that made my early youth so troubling was the number of painful illnesses from which I suffered. The most serious involved inflammation of the brain-membrane (meningitis). I came down with it on a hot day in Ramadan after I had been fasting and working very hard. The doctor, an Algerian named Murad, informed my father that the condition was very serious, but he would be doing his best to save me. I remember that my mother sold her jewellery in order to help pay his fees. The process of extracting fluid from my spinal cord was done with a needle and without anaesthetic. Even today, the mere memory of the excruciating pain sends a shiver down my body and causes a tangible psychological feeling of depression. Once I had recovered, my family and friends called me “the one who escaped Azra’il’s clutches”. Another illness, although less severe, involved a boil on my top lip; I had woken up that morning with my face swollen and distorted. This time, medicines and antidotes did the trick. Compared with these two illnesses, the extraction of my gall bladder was a relatively inconsequential matter.

While I was enduring these ongoing illnesses, I was in the second grade of the Moulay Ismail secondary school. I was soon able to catch up what I had missed. Once I had recovered my health and energy, I redoubled my efforts to acquire as much knowledge and language as possible. Whatever else I may forget, I will never forget the role of my teacher at the time, Hasan al-Mani’i, who rewarded me top grade for my compositions, some of which I still have – on *al-khamriyat* or wine poems, and another on urban love poetry. God grant him long life! He had a very creative way of getting his students to like Western literature, including Tennessee Williams, John Steinbeck, Carlos Fuentes, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus. In the following baccalauréat year, I discovered my philosophical inclinations, thanks to two French teachers, Cox and Lumière, both of whom read out my

compositions to the other students as examples for imitation.

At the end of the 1960s, I transferred to the College of Arts and Humanities in Rabat, bringing with me a baccalauréat diploma with high distinction and pride in my growing store of knowledge and language, although it did not extend as far as boasting and delusion. At the college I studied for degrees in both philosophy and sociology. While I was there, my father died of a heart attack that struck him down all of a sudden during a religious festival. Just a few years later, my mother followed him, struck down by high blood-pressure, a condition that seemed to be inherited from her family since it usually happened unexpectedly and thus spared them the violence and pain of dying.

It was in Rabat that I became convinced of my inclination to write literature. The instigator was the late Mohammed Lahbabi, who was my professor and Dean of the College of Arts. He encouraged me to take part in the competition in dramatic writing, organised by the Moroccan Writers Union of which he was the head at the time. I submitted my play, *Al-‘Aka-keez* (Crutches), which won a token prize and was published in *Afaq*, the union’s journal. It was the first prose text I published, and I did not publish it again later. It was this professor who extracted me from a crisis of hesitating between the fields of philosophy and literature. He advised me to go with the first, because, in his view, it would serve as preparation for and involvement in the second. So that was the choice I made, and I thus followed the course of the professor, who had managed to combine the two fields and write works in both. He also took the credit for resolving my dilemma as to whether to concentrate on philosophy written in Arabic or in French. For my degree I chose the latter, and have never regretted that decision, not least because some professors working in the former of those two languages used to scoff at my questions – to such an extent that one day a professor told me to keep quiet, accusing me of arrogance (as he saw it). The one thing that aggravated me about the late Lahbabi was that he was very stingy when it came to grading my papers on translation as being above average, even though there were no corrections; he justified it by saying that he did not want me to get too conceited. The name that sticks in my memory for philosophy in French was Professor Joseph Chenu, the author of a single book on the dramas of Gabriel Marcel. Of all the teachers he was the most eloquent and clever, improvising his lessons on the most difficult of topics, the history of logic in general, and formal logic in particular. The amazing thing about him was that he could talk about the subject and explain it to students while being completely drunk, something

that only showed in the extreme redness of his jaws or in inhaling the smell if you had to go up to him.

There were other people as well with whom I had a stimulating literary relationship. Among them was Mohammed Ibrahim Bouallou, who was the first person to read a short story that I had written about the visions and fantasies of a night-guard posted outside a women's bathhouse. I remember that he said nice things about it, even though he did not publish it in his journal *Aqlam*, possibly because of its sexual allusions. Another person was the late Abdeldjabbar Sahimi, who was kind enough to receive me in his office at the newspaper, *Al-Alam*. He talked to me about the poems I had been sending him to read. He had encouraging things to say, but pointed out that in one of them I had declined an indeclinable noun. From the grammatical viewpoint I agreed with his comment, but, as I left, I told myself that the mistake was justifiable from the perspective of metre and, as the phrase has it, "poetic necessity". He did welcome and publish my critical articles; among them I can recall what I wrote criticising the lectures and articles of the doctor and Islamic preacher Al-Mahdi ibn 'Abbud. At the time, I was a Marxist through and through and a Nasserist nationalist, all the while criticising in equal measure chauvinistic Arab nationalists who knew nothing about either history or the particular circumstances of the Greater Arab Maghrib.

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Finally in this context, I have to recall the late Abdelkebir Khatibi, my sociology professor, to whom I later felt bound by a strong and fruitful friendship. He was a capable and successful researcher and novelist, and his contemporary and rival, Tahar Ben Jelloun, was not his equal. He wrote in French, and yet his attitude to Francophonie was always critical and antagonistic, something that led its supporters to punish him and put a stranglehold on him in publication and informational circles. Gallimard only published one of his novels, *Le livre du sang* (The Book of Blood). Among the things for which they could never forgive him was this passage from his autobiography, *La mémoire tatouée* (Tattooed Memory):

“During the Algerian War I was a writer with no portfolio. I would debate out of a love for national culture, identity, and their opposites, or else revolution and Islam. Since every French community had an Arab in its service, we would listen to non-stop confessions. The service Arab used to say: ‘I am the link between East and West, Christianity and Islam, Africa and Asia.’ Other things as well! You poor Arab! How come you’ve been left on your own in a veritable chain of such linkages? I used to see some of them hawking an image of their identity from newspaper kiosks, clinging eagerly to the slightest acknowledgement of their existence. ‘Come on,’ the Frenchman says, ‘hurl your abuse in our language. We’ll be delighted that you’ve learned it so well.’”

Out of a sense of sympathy for that valuable confession, I must state that it was really strange to see Thierry de Beaucé (a former French minister) addressing Khatibi with the following demeaning expression of surprise: “I’m astonished by this statement, showing me that the French language has been minimally productive in comparison with the palpable successes of Latin-American literature. Imported Spanish has enriched an entire continent. However, we cannot make the same statement about French in relation to the Maghrib.” In the same book you can refer to Khatibi’s letter of protest that he sent to Alain Decaux, the former Minister of Francophonie. That was after the organizers of the debate on “the general situation of Francophonie” had refused to include his paper in their agenda, because, as they put it, it contained ideas alien to the plan and did not serve the cultural policies of France.

During my time as a university student, the image of Professor Abdallah Laroui would appear before me. His books gained their power from the fact that they were firmly grounded in history. When it comes to his fame among intellectuals in general and the various “readings” and outcries that came with them, it can all be ascribed to two categories of work that he

ventured to publish, based on his historical learning and his knowledge of new methods that involved an application of theory: *Contemporary Arab Ideology / The Crisis of Arab Intellectuals / The Arabs and Historical Thought / Our Culture in the Light of History*. In addition, there are other works with an analytical and educational purpose involving definitions; in all of them the author delves into a subject that is closer to philosophy and the history of ideas than to history in the commonly understood sense of the term. In that particular context, it is hard to talk about the authority of factual history and its ability to subdivide and discriminate, the exact opposite of what Laroui's statements and opinions suggest. Here we are in the realm of interpretation, the production of sense and meaning, a place where there exist methodological and cognitive problematics. It emerges that theory and theorization are not a riddle; instead they can reveal a fertile and complex intellectual posture. The value of these works also lies in the fact that they have managed to raise a number of questions, not to mention rejoinders and criticisms in which I have played a part. In summary, such reactions were either based on an ideology that criticized Laroui's own ideology and its idealist, elitist methodology, or else on the way in which opponents of historicism, including Claude Lévi-Strauss and Louis Althusser, made light of philosophy. It was simply not enough to gesture and hint when it came to responding to the host of criticism that regarded historicism as a dogmatic school, one marked by repetitiousness, using a kind of cognitive bargaining, and not making use of anything either in discovering principles and structures or forecasting and assessing the future.

I devoted a whole chapter in my book, *Critique of Stone-Age Culture and Primitive Thought*, to Professor Abdallah Laroui, one of whose students I consider myself to be. The chapter's title is "Concerning Laroui's historicism and the modernism puzzle". It does not surprise me that he chose to disregard it and say nothing; that was the way he usually handled publications about him, unless the intent was to support his views and extol his work. Something else that both amazed and saddened me was that Laroui did not take advantage of the process of translating his *L'ideologie Arabe Contemporaine* into Arabic (a project that he himself undertook) to revise and add to the earlier French version so as to bring it up to date and fill out certain chapters in the light of changes and upheavals that had occurred during the thirty years that separated the two editions, events that had impacted the whole world and had major effects in Arab and Islamic countries, albeit to different degrees. But, instead of dealing with this issue in an introductory section that would be somewhat detailed, all the author

did in his new introduction was to malign his Lebanese translator and then raise two basic questions which he proceeds to brush over: “Islamic awakening”, and “Breach in the Communist camp”.

If there is a nice piece of Moroccan cooperation between Professor Laroui and myself, then it involves our joint idea to create an “Association for Translation and Comprehensive Research”. He himself notes: “A number of students responded to the invitation of myself and Bensalem Himmich to establish an association concerned with the identification of basic reference works for modern thought with a view to translating them into Arabic.” (see his *Morning Thoughts*, 2001, p. 199)

I undertook to compose a groundwork document which was praised by the professor himself, something that I took as a good sign since he had retired, and which was endorsed by all the people who had been invited to his home. Here is a single paragraph from it:

“Professors must inevitably face up to their duties as translators toward both students and researchers. As part of their professional activities, they are now actually translating a number of basic source works into Arabic. What is needed now is for the work currently in process to be properly organised and coordinated so that efforts are not dissipated and the initiative does not remain isolated and unrecognised, even repeating what has already been done elsewhere. With the establishment of an association such as this, among the most obvious benefits will be agreement on an initial list of references and resources relevant to the professors’ own specialisations, invitations to translate them into Arabic using established and accepted principles, launching publicity campaigns to boost the texts and their publication, and to collect and store the technical terms that emerge from them. They will then no longer be unknown to the majority of people. These then are some of the immediate useful goals which need to be incorporated into the responsibilities of concerned research professors. At this initial phase, their thoughts need to be focused on these matters . . .”

However, our professor soon retreated to what he called his ‘den’, and never spoke again about the subject in any way. I advised my colleagues to consider it as simply a dream, or else a mirage dated the 22nd July 1994.

*Translated by Roger Allen*

*Winner of the Sheikh Zayed Book Award  
for Literature 2018*

# *Remorse Test*

## *by Khalil Sweileh*

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Khalil Sweileh was born in 1959 in the city of Hasaka, Syria. He is a poet, novelist and cultural journalist. His portfolio of works includes many collections of poetry, including *Prefaces*, *That was the Scene* and *Tracing the Marks*, in addition to a number of novels, which include *Writing Love*, *Express Mail*, *The Gazelle will Come to You*, and *The Barbarians' Paradise*. He has won a number of literary and journalism awards, including the 2009 Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature for his novel *Warraq al-Hubb* (*Writing Love*, AUC Press, 2012) and the Arab Journalism Award (2010).

### *About the Book*

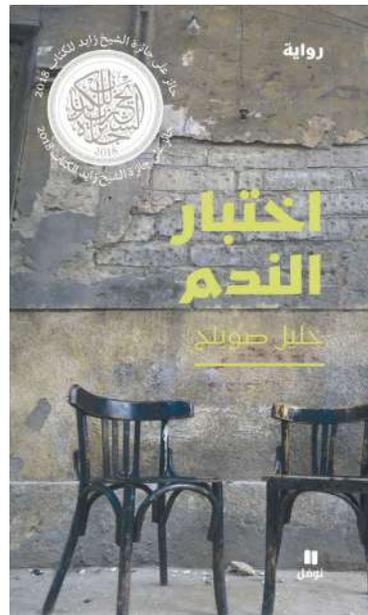
The novel portrays an inward view of the Syrian Civil War tragedy: the author takes the reader on a trip around Damascus, trudging along a number of memory lanes and presenting the psychological conflicts arising from the shattered reality of place and society. The novel marks a new beginning in Syrian literature, with its singular use of narrative tools and vocabulary construction.

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*An excerpt from*

## *Remorse Test*

REMORSE? MAYBE it means a belated apology for acts we committed at a time when we thought we were doing the right thing, or for acts we failed to carry out at the time we thought about them. Like me putting my arms around your waist at the junction of Firdaws Street and Mutanabbi Street on that October afternoon, on the grounds that the rain called for an intimacy of the kind that happens in the movies. What there was between us was expected to end in the Picasso restaurant when we had a meal of chips with mayonnaise. On the way you told me, firstly that you were hungry, secondly that you were vegetarian, and thirdly that you loved potatoes. I had to look for a place that would meet your requirements. All the tables and chairs were red. That was a significant pretext for delving into the derivatives of that colour in the domain of desire and deciphering our mysterious relationship through ambiguous, flirtatious remarks interspersed with fleeting references to the blood feuds that the war left behind, which also featured the colour red. You had been going to put off your second visit to Damascus because of the heavy rain in the south. Basically I didn't pin great hopes on this visit and I couldn't seriously imagine any special reason that would bring us together again. Maybe boredom was one of my reasons, but I did see your unexpected visit as a good omen or as a time-out that relieved the boredom of days that were all much alike. Offhand I had told you that your phone call that morning had greatly rein-



vigorated me and that you were like a sudden rain cloud that had slaked my inner thirst. A late-night chat on Facebook dispelled my expectations of loss, since writing in cyberspace gives us a dose of courage that enables us to come out with things we cannot say face to face. Similarly, evasive eloquence using enigmatic expressions, references that are open to interpretation or lines of poetry borrowed from popular blog sites will gradually break down the barriers of reserve through slips of the tongue that at first appear to be unintentional. You were setting random traps for me too, but not as vigorously as I was storming your impregnable walls and trying to probe into dangerous areas and murky waters that you were wary of exploring – those that challenged the limits of modesty. To be more precise, let's say that you lit the fuel with an invisible match, then put out the fire with a counter-expression that had nothing to do with the firewood the two of us had gathered in the nearby forest of beguilement as a kind of escape or as a declaration of surrender. Our first acquaintanceship came about through a phone call from you, exactly five years ago. You were somewhat flustered. You told me there was something in your life that concerned me and you would explain what you meant when we met. I didn't take much interest, or I forgot about it completely. Five years? It's practically equal to the years of hell that haven't finished yet. In that stormy period, there was someone who shook the branches of the tree and the fruit fell around it, then other people came and crushed the fruit with their heavy shoes, and then burnt down the tree.

What happened later wrecked my plans completely.

In a telephone interview I had told a journalist that my next novel would be about love. I told her this with full confidence, like a tennis player who has finished his warm-up exercises and only has to rush on to court to put into effect his secret plans for how he will hit the ball into his rival's territory. The fires of war threw my thoughts far away and it was no longer conceivable that I would write about "carefree love affairs" amid the daily hell and the news of the dead and the debts of hatred that we had to pay to the barbarians every day.

But first I had to answer you on the question of hatred, not on the question of remorse. Hatred that was wrapped in rotten chocolate and buried resentments with a taste as bitter as gall and poisoned daggers in the back at the moment of embrace. Hatred that abandoned the guise of forgiveness in favour of revenge at the first juncture.

The first move in this imaginary game of chess came when I suddenly moved my knight into the square that belonged to you, by making an un-

expected remark that overstepped the bounds of caution. “The smell of you invades my isolation,” I said. The reserved nature of our previous nocturnal chats meant that we could not handle such a sudden change. I was testing how flustered you would be when faced with a sensual remark of this kind. I was so fed up with wandering around in the paradise of spiritualities where you had entrenched yourself in order to save yourself from straying into my domain of expressing myself candidly.

Right after reading some of your poems, I had advised you to liberate your diction from the morass of ready expressions that didn’t add a single apple to the orchard of desire and to purge your obscure feelings of the over-interpretation that weighed them down. I added an improvised phrase that somehow suddenly popped up in front of me like a squirrel: “We can’t go into the intensive care unit without a stretcher.” By way of explanation, in response to the exclamation mark you then sent me, I said that writing is the moment that separates life from death, or the white stretcher that takes us to the intensive care unit, where we can breathe in enough oxygen to survive. So we write in order to convert carbon dioxide into oxygen and to convert coal into wild fruit with a sharp taste, and to tame the pains and sins of the body.

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She tried to suppress the phrase “The smell of you invades my isolation” by not responding with a decisive phrase of her own. Instead she merely chose a ready-made emoji from those available on the menu – an emoji with eyes in the shape of little hearts. But this attempt did not last long. Three days after that chat the dialogue box lit up with the words “I miss you”, and after evasive comments by the two of us, she ended her chat with the words “have a good night, with love in the morning.”

At this point I realised she had started to sink into the quicksands of iniquity, leaving the teachings of our master Jaleddin al-Rumi far behind her. She had abandoned forever the lexicon of Sufism which, like a tortoise’s shell, had concealed her feelings within its hard carapace. The game we had been playing, with her as the tortoise and me as a prickly hedgehog, had been amusing, maybe exciting. She had been sticking her neck out a little and then withdrawing, while I displayed my hedgehog prickles. The hedgehog and the tortoise? I’m trying to remember a story that includes the two of them. My memory doesn’t come up with one. The two of them have their own separate stories, so what might bring us together in a single

story? As a tortoise she should be running a race with a hare and she would definitely win, and as a hedgehog I should have a fight with a snake and win. What amazed me in the story of the hedgehog is that it's a nocturnal creature that doesn't sleep, whereas I, on the other hand, am not so prickly, and if I do raise my prickles it's to defend myself from an unexpected attack.

You had chosen to be a butterfly in the language games we played in times of boredom. I likened you to a gazelle when I commented on a picture you sent me, with you spreading your arms on top of a rock in the mountains, and then among the ruins of a castle abandoned a thousand years ago, with long curly black hair, as if you were embracing a nearby cloud. But you insisted on flying with the wings of a butterfly.

In a later comment with no particular context, she wrote: "Do you prefer my hair or my poetry?" It took me some time to find an appropriate response. "Your poetry needs the madness of your gypsy hair," I wrote.

Her hair really was gorgeous, and I very much wanted to bury my fingers in its curls while she was busy devouring what was left from the plate of chips in front of her. I imagined the scene again as we had tea in the Trattoria Café in the Shaalan district, this time inserting another detail – a beauty spot at the bottom of her neck that I discovered when she turned her head to see Whitney Houston singing an old song broadcast at high volume on the TV screen. Then my eyes moved down towards her cleavage, where I noticed faint freckles in the shape of an upturned pear. But I did not have any great expectation that our relationship would develop any further than that, since she shied away like a gazelle from any ambiguous flirtatious expression that I tried. At sunset on that October day, as we left the café, I asked myself: "What is remorse?"

On our way to the bus stop, I was telling her the plot of the film *Repentance* by the Georgian director Tengiz Abuladze, as an interim response to her question, though what she wanted was a response to the question of whether she had been wrong or right when she chose to leave her husband after seven years of love, then jealousy, then slow death. Half of those years had been an intolerable hell, judging by the events she described to me in the café. A man selling chestnuts from a cart at the wall of Al-Madfa' Garden disrupted the scene a little: she made asides about her passion for chestnuts and apologised for interrupting me when I was trying to describe

the scene in the film in which the mayor is buried in the garden of his house and his corpse keeps reappearing after every attempt to bury him. It was a stupid idea to bring up the Stalin era in all its cruelty and violence at an intimate moment such as this, but I was carried away and finished off describing the whole plot of the film. My hands were stained black by the chestnut shells – the hot chestnuts she was consuming with relish, absorbed and in a stupor listening to the rest of the story:

“One of Stalin’s victims, a woman, lives near the house. She was the person who dug up the grave and took the body out every night, kind of in revenge for the killing of her parents on orders from the general who had no scruples about committing any kind of crime, because such a man, weighed down by sins, rancour and brutality, did not deserve the dignity of burial, she said. After the woman was detained and put on trial, she asserted in her testimony that a man who had massacred innocent people should not be buried. For his part, the grandson was shocked when he found out how cruel his grandfather had been, although the son denied the charges made against his father. But the woman insisted on her position that a criminal could not be buried until his crimes had been revealed in public, because burying the past meant forgiving the people who had destroyed the lives of others by brutality, cruelty and savagery, so the grandson went and committed suicide in remorse for his role in a fabricated version of history, while the son had to throw his father’s body off the cliff that overlooks the village.”

She gasped several times as she listened to the plot of the film and thought about the metaphor of remorse and the meaning of silence about similar crimes, even if it was about the sins in an abortive love story that ended in separation.

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That evening the minibuses on the Muhajireen–Bab Touma route were crowded with passengers. They all went past without stopping and after twenty minutes waiting she still wasn’t able to find an empty seat, so she decided to hail a taxi so that she wouldn’t be any later than she was already getting to Jermana, where she was staying temporarily with her friend Joumana Salloum, who worked as a news photographer at a government news agency, and so that she could avoid the crowds waiting to be searched at the military checkpoints that were common at night all the way there. Through the back window of the taxi, she waved to me with the complete

works of Giuseppe Ungaretti, the greatest Italian sculptor of words like polished marble, as I had described him to her. She thanked me again for my valuable present. I was trying to undermine the rigid concept of poetry she believed in by offering her a counter-conviction, in my belief that poetry flourishes in another seedbed, not in the one she was used to in her readings. I told her that as a butterfly she should try nectar from all kinds of flowers and breathe in the secret smell of all plants, not drown in the mummified texts imposed on the Arabic literature syllabus by the academics in the university. "Listen, poetry means imagination gone mad and running riot, just as it is an archive of sense data, from al-Mutanabbi to the latest dropout poet no one has yet discovered." About ten minutes after she'd left the place, as I was looking in my jacket pocket for the key to the door of my building, my mobile phone rang with a call from her. As I went upstairs, with again another power cut, and using my lighter to find a path through the darkness, she told me she was listening to Umm Kulthoum sing *It's Too Late* on the radio in the taxi. She put the phone close to the speaker to prove to me she was telling the truth, and also to point out the coincidence that we had been talking about regret a short time ago and now we were hearing a song about it. I had a terrible headache so I took a Panadol, then I relaxed fully dressed on my chaotic bed. I put the earphones of my mobile phone in my ears and scanned the radio stations for the song. Umm Kulthoum was still singing in full throat: "What use are you, remorse? Oh remorse, remorse."

Around noon the next day I was waiting for you to call before you went to your village in the south, either under your assumed name, Amal Naji, or by your real name, Asmahan Meshal. I was unbearably bored by the conversation of the people sitting at the table in al-Rawda café. I no longer had the patience for talk about dead people, shells, displaced people or the state of the weather. I had told you that over the past five years I had tried to be patient in all kinds of ways and I don't fully know how I have put up with the arrangements for the moveable feast of killings, massacres, mass graves, famines and lethal violence. It makes me feel uncomfortable and my spirit has been worn down by the enormity of the loss. I want to breathe different air but there's no haven other than this café. When I lost hope of you coming, I left the place so angry that I left my packet of tobacco and my lighter on the table, which often happens to me when I'm upset.

Without any preliminaries she sent me an email that night: “A woman wakes and sings / Wind follows and entrances her / And stretches her upon the earth / And the true dream takes her. / This earth is nude / This woman is a paramour / This wind is strong / This dream is death.” I read the lines, from the poem *Bedouin Song* by Giuseppe Ungaretti, several times, trying to work out why she chose these lines rather than any others. Was it an overture to seduction or just a random choice from the book? The sensuality was obvious here and it might have been a clear hint that she wanted to enter a tempestuous phase in our relationship, going beyond our original agreement that we would be just friends without any emotional baggage and that I wouldn’t begrudge her my advice on the writings she sends me. “I will be your pet cat, sit close to your feet and listen to your valuable advice,” she said. I objected to the idea and promised I would read her writings seriously and then sort the flowers from the weeds. She immediately wrote: “Very well, my teacher and master.” I replied that I didn’t want to hear such words from her again, or anything associated with the idea of subjugation.

In the first stage of our acquaintanceship she sent me her writings almost daily and I read them as personal messages, confessions or expressions of pain: over time I noticed a different tone intruding on her language, with blatantly sensual words and phrases that suggested sighs of deprivation and a hidden lasciviousness that wasn’t common in her previous writings. She finally seemed to have realised that poetry operates in another domain, where all the senses are mobilised and where one “takes pleasure in violating language” as I wrote to her in a philosophising vein, with the intention of inciting her to explore terrain that needed more aggressive treatment – “with an axe and not with a wooden stick”.

“An axe!” she wrote in amazement and disapproval, and then added cunningly: “How could a butterfly like me put up with such cruelty?” I improvised another phrase intended to fill in the gap further: “Writing about love needs fangs too.” Once again, she disapproved of the word “fangs”. At this point I realised the depth of the chasm between us. She had long lived in isolation in a forgotten village that no shell had touched throughout the years of war, keeping herself busy discovering varieties of wild plants – marjoram, sage, lavender and rosemary, as well as birds, reptiles and insects, drawing on the walls of her room by day and testing her determination to silence the howling wolves of desire in her breast at night, while I was wandering around the south of the city, burying the dead in funeral processions every day, maybe every hour.

Yes, an axe, I replied, thinking back to dozens of scenes where an axe had been raised over the neck of someone who'd been forced to kneel, or of a decapitated man whose body was hanging from an electricity pole in a square in a city a thousand years old. Of course, I meant our need for an aesthetic lexicon that explains how to combine on a single page the weight of a sharp axe left over from the Middle Ages and smart bomb technology, in the same way as those barbarians found divine fatwas for killing people with axes, swords or suicide belts. In case I got carried away with other examples of violence, she asked me: "What are you reading now?"

"The Writer and His Ghosts," I said.

"Damn ghosts, axes and suicide belts! Who's the book by?"

"Ernesto Sabato, an Argentine physicist who turned to writing to confront the brutality of the world and to accelerate the disaster that's staring at humanity, as he puts it. He thinks a writer's mission is to 'vomit up his inner world'."

"I don't know any other Argentines, except for Maradona the footballer, and maybe some yerba mate brand names. Oh yes, now I remember Borges. He's Argentine, isn't he?"

Then, without any breaks, she added: "I miss you."

That night I had a nightmare that was worse than Ernesto Sabato's. The 11th century poet Aboul Alaa al-Ma'arri was standing at the door with his head rolling on the ground some paces away from the rest of his body. What I remember is that he handed me a torn copy of his book, *The Epistle of Forgiveness*, and asked me to repair it and recopy it. He looked just like he does in pictures of a statue that turns up in newspapers and on websites. When I pointed at his severed head, he said sadly: "The days shatter us like glass / into fragments that can never be put back together" and then moved on.

Later, whenever I went out of the house, I looked at the spot where al-Ma'arri's head had landed and at the trail of blood that ran down the stairs in front of me.

I would shut the door and hurry down the stairs to get the ghost of al-Ma'arri out of my head. But it was no use and it took me a long time to forget the scene.

One evening she write to me: "Yesterday I dreamt about you."

After some linguistic equivocations, metaphors and references I gathered

that it was an erotic dream, a dream of inflamed desires that she had previously avoided talking about, or else she was content to throw her fishing line into shallow waters and then pull it out without a catch. That was because our ambiguous relationship was still at the threshold of a room that folk tales advise us not to enter, lest we come to harm.

I wasn't in the mood to get into a game of undercover seduction. I was anxious about al-Ma'arri visiting me again in a dream, or nightmare to be more precise – about opening the door to a man with his head cut off who asks me to repair a torn copy of his book.

But was it a hint that I should reread *The Epistle of Forgiveness*, and should I first meet the poets of paradise or the poets of hell, as they were assigned in the book? And what if I reversed their status during the copying process, to the opposite of how al-Ma'arri saw them, like putting Imru' al-Qais, Antara bin Shaddad, Tarafa ibn al-Abd, al-Muraqqash the Elder, al-Muraqqash the Younger, and al-Shanfara in heaven and Zuhair ibn Abi Sulma, al-A'sha, al-Naabigha al-Dhubyani, and Abid ibn al-Abras in hell?

The Day of Judgment, hell and heaven postponed – that's what happens here every day, in the tunnels, on the bridges and at the checkpoints. A recurrent hell that has no less impact than al-Ma'arri's hell. A lavish theatrical set for throngs lost in the limbo between heaven and hell. Human throngs in chaos, as if they're running away from a fire, an earthquake or a divine curse. Rebellion and anarchy, annihilation and nothingness. At this moment of delirium Antara bin Shaddad was crossing the road, heading to the encampment of a squadron of armed men to pay a ransom to Abla's kidnapers. A thousand camels got through the first checkpoint with difficulty. Under duress Antara accepted the conditions set by the soldiers at the checkpoint – confiscation of a quantity of camel milk at the personal request of the commander on duty, who was playing backgammon in the guardroom. But when Antara and his caravan reached the encampment he found that Abla had killed herself after forty gunmen had taken turns raping her.

While I was going over *The Epistle of Forgiveness* I was surprised to find that al-Ma'arri consigns al-Muraqqash the Younger to perdition without hesitation. He should have escaped that fate, I told myself, if only for having written this line: "Wherever you were, whatever land or country you visited, you brought that country to life."

*Translated by Jonathan Wright*

Winner of the Sheikh Zayed Book Award  
for Literature 2017

# *Autumn of Innocence*

## by Abbas Beydoun



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Abbas Beydoun is a poet and novelist, born in Tyre in Southern Lebanon in 1945 to a family passionate about literature. He studied Arabic Literature in Beirut's Arab University, and achieved

his MA in Literature from the Sorbonne, France. As a poet he excelled in prose poetry, and has published numerous poetry collections, including *Critique of Pain*, *Overdose of Time*, *Glass Graveyards*, *Chambers*, *B.B.B.*, *A Ticket for Two*, and *The Metaphysics of the Fox*. In 2002 he published his first novel entitled *Blood Test* (which was translated by Max Weiss and published by Syracuse University Press in 2008), followed by two narratives entitled *The Mirrors of Frankenstein* and *The Album of Loss*, the latter inspired by his biography. His narrative style blends volatile reality with a hint of fantasy. These have been followed by further works, including his novel *Autumn of Innocence*, which won the Sheikh Zayed Book Award.

### *About the Book*

This novel unfolds the tragic story of a father-son relationship, which comes to a head during the Arab Spring, through exploring religious extremism and the effects of tyranny and terror on a family. The father, having strangled his wife when his son was a toddler and fled his Lebanese village to Syria, returns 18 years later as a religious extremist, with a gang of men, to terrorize his village and his son, who had grown up looking for a life of love and enjoyment. The novel's symbolic structure is also distinctive, with the village standing for the majority of the Arab countries.

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*An excerpt from*

## *Autumn of Innocence*

### From Ghassan to Fouad

THIS IS a letter I prefer to write by hand, as they used to write. We don't need to go over our relationship from the start. We grew up together as brothers under the same roof. Your father took me into his family after the disaster that struck my family. I was two years older than you, and Samia was my age. My father ran off that night and disappeared for all these years, but he has finally written to me. In his last letter he said he was coming back to see me. I'm worried and that's why I'm writing to you. You're no longer at home. Your father says I'm the only one he has now. I don't hate my father but I hardly remember him. I don't hold it against him that he strangled my

mother. They say she cheated on him and he found her lover in bed with her. I don't hate my mother, either, and I don't feel she betrayed me. Sometimes the idea of a man in her bed disturbs me, but I don't hate her. Sometimes I want to discover her lover, whose name no one has ever mentioned. My father must have known him. When we meet I'll ask him. I think he's closer to me than my father and we have something in common. They say I could be the other man's son. They don't know who he is but they have plenty to say about a man they don't know. They even know how tall he was: didn't he jump from the balcony without breaking his legs? He landed on the ground safely, or else he would have been seen struggling to his feet. Why did the dog let him escape? Was it because he really was from the family, and that's why it didn't even bark at him? Is my father the only person who knows the secret? And then he disappeared straight away without saying anything? Everyone, even my uncle, your father, remained under



suspicion, but everyone stayed where they were. They all stayed in the village – no one moved away. If they had really been under suspicion they would have shown a sign. My father's brother waited two years before he left for Beirut. The silence left wide scope for conjecture. They thought about the people who were closest. My father's two brothers were the prime suspects. They wanted the betrayal to come from within the family, but there was no indication that this was the case. I hated them but they kept trying to win my favour, they and their children. In the village they said they wanted me as an in-law. The most beautiful of them, my aunt Bushra's daughter Yusra, was as honest as usual about everything. She sent her youngest brother to look for me and she received me in all her finery, preparing me to be her fiancé. It's true that my uncle Adel has thought of moving into our abandoned house since the incident, but I refused and he didn't ask again. I had grown up among my cousins on my mother's side, but I didn't cut off my relations on my father's side. The only reason for this was that I believed the rumour. The dog hadn't barked, but that wasn't enough to accuse my father's brother. The dog's now tethered in the garden and I look after him. I feed him and take him for walks. He's what's left of my family. He runs ahead of me, comes back to me and runs around me. He's old now and his eyesight has started to weaken. He wasn't even a year old when my mother died. He spent days by her grave, until her brother brought him back and tied him up in the garden. Her brother wants me to leave the dog for other people to look after but I insist on doing that myself, on time, every time. I love how he barks and jumps up as soon as he notices me. He's old but he still stands up on his hind legs, licks me and runs around me. They think the dog's the only one who knows the secret. They're waiting for him to drag someone in by the shirt, or jump on someone and pin him down, but he hasn't done that. My father left him at home and disappeared.

When the woman next door found my mother strangled in bed she screamed and the neighbours flocked to her screams. My aunts and uncles on my mother's side, who lived in the same neighbourhood, also came running. My uncles on my father's side, who lived on the edge of the village, came late and were criticised for their tardiness. My father had strangled my mother and that wasn't something they could disavow. It was their brother who had done it and it wasn't easy for them to be at the scene of his crime. By daring to come, they were blaming my mother and absolving my father of his crime. They were in two minds and came at the end, when the house was full of people and it was clear that my father had got away

with his deed. Even so, people condemned them for what their brother had done. They turned up with their womenfolk and their adult children and clustered in one part of the house, along a wall where a picture of my father was hanging. They let the others go in and then left. They didn't shout or raise their voices. They had come only so that they wouldn't be blamed for the crime. The police turned up from the village police station but they didn't do anything. They knew there was no longer anything they could do. Ever since the fedayeen had come into the village and many of the local youths had joined them, these matters were no longer the business of the police. They were nobody's business. My father had fled and there was no one we could look to for justice. First everyone had to be convinced a crime had been committed. My father's flight was a piece of evidence, but if he had found a man in her bed, he had a right to kill her. People knew he was quick-tempered and violent and they had often saved her from his assaults, but now it was a different matter. He had seen a man in her bed. No one was certain of this but the crime amounted to something of that kind. The crime was consistent with such an act of infidelity. The crime was evidence of betrayal. My father's relatives gathered under the picture of my father and didn't speak. No doubt they were mulling questions of this kind. With time, no doubt the others started to ask themselves the same questions. As soon as they buried my mother they declared her guilty. The sight of her strangled in her bed was evidence against her. They had started talking about the lover's name. They didn't find a name but they guessed it was a relative, a very close relative. My father disappeared and the lover disappeared. It wasn't difficult. It happened easily and it must have happened within the family. It must have been part of a family feud, and it might have been an issue between two brothers. It might have been between cousins. It definitely didn't go further than that.

It might have been a case of a woman sleeping with two brothers in the same room and in the same bed. Of my father's two brothers they chose Omar, the younger, as the prime suspect. He was the same age as my mother, and maybe that was why they chose him rather than the elder brother, who was bigger and more handsome and, on top of that, had a big reputation with women. They chose the younger one, who seemed stupid to them and even stammered. They compared him to my father, who was big and tough and quick to draw a knife. It was said they gave my mother to my father out of fear. She couldn't refuse. He had stopped her in the street to tell her he was going to marry her. My father owned half the village. In fact his mother was the heir and the property was hers,

40 but the man who got hold of the property automatically became village headman. My father said he was going to marry her, but my mother, who was seen as the prettiest girl in the village, raised an eyebrow and didn't answer. She didn't like him speaking to her in the middle of the street. She was with a friend and he had spoken to her in the friend's presence. He hadn't taken her aside to talk to her. He said what he said and walked on without waiting for an answer. He was just telling her. It was as good as an order. He had made the decision for her and she needed only to know. His mother didn't want him to marry her. In front of many people she said she wouldn't go down to her wretched house to ask for the hand of a shopkeeper's daughter. That would be beneath her. The village talked about it and fragments of gossip reached my mother's family. When there was too much talk of it, she couldn't take it anymore. She went to her aunt's house in Beirut and disappeared there. A week later my father followed her to Beirut and told her she had to come home. This time my mother raised an eyebrow again and said: "That's not how people get engaged." If he wanted her, he would have to stop his mother talking about her. She wasn't worthless because she was a shopkeeper's daughter. If his mother didn't feel honoured to be received in their house, there was nothing to discuss. My father was angry when he heard this but he refrained from hitting her. He did threaten her, however. If she didn't come home she would be responsible for whatever happened, he said. My mother went back to the village the same day, worried that someone might insult her father. But she stayed home and never went out. In the end my father's mother backed down, visited my mother's family and proposed the marriage. They agreed and she agreed. The visit was enough for them. No one in the village would have turned down a suitor like my father.

I wasn't yet three years old when the disaster struck. They moved me to the home of my aunt Bushra. Her house was full of children – six and now a new one that made the house even noisier, a new one who wouldn't be welcomed by the others. I kept my distance in fear but they drew me in and made me one of them. That way I became a pawn in their contests. There was room in their games for someone they could push around and sometimes slap, and I was usually that person. My aunt defended me, since I was an orphan who needed her kindness, but this made me a target for their revenge. For some reason or other I moved to the home of my maternal uncle Jawad. This came as a relief to me. You and your sister Samia were my age. In fact at the age of five I was a few days older than you two. It was as if you needed a third and were waiting for one. You took me into

your lives with ease. Three children find more games than two. Your mother, who I gathered was my mother's friend, thought she had a duty to protect me. My father's sisters and brothers continued to take an interest in me and help with my education. They enrolled me in an expensive foreign school that Uncle Jawad couldn't have afforded, and where he didn't send his own sons. After that they moved me to the American University, and I was a hard-working student because no-one had ever pushed me to work hard. No-one brought me up but the street didn't take me up either. Uncle Jawad was frightened of disciplining me. He saw me as a ward that he only needed to protect and preserve. For my part, I needed to be in a family, so I had to make one. I tried to be Uncle Jawad's right hand. I saw his decisions as an obligation I had to fulfil and I tried to hold you two to them, even when they made no sense. Uncle Jawad wanted me to be friends with my cousins on my father's side. This time things didn't go easily. They weren't ready for that. I tried to force them to be friends. I waited for them in their homes but when they came home I found them indifferent towards me. The fact that my father had murdered my mother rubbed off on me. It was a legacy I couldn't shake off. I lived on the sidelines and I couldn't easily become part of the family. This stigma was like a birthmark that no one would forget, as if it had always been part of me. There was even a trace of pity or disapproval in the way other people looked at me. That was life's gift to me, roughly speaking. I had come from an act of murder, from a crime. I think I did my best to cover it up. I was always worried that something I did might suddenly call attention to it.

Eventually when I was thirteen I found my way to the mosque and I deliberately carried the Qur'an in my hand and fasted several days a month. But all that wasn't enough to reassure me. I would panic at the sight of a knife or a rope, as if they stirred memories deep inside me. When I drank my first glass of beer, I felt I was a murderer, but I insisted on drinking it. Maybe I was insisting on murdering. That night I went home very tired and fell asleep immediately. I always felt that my fingers were short because my father had put his fingers around my mother's neck. Having short fingers felt like a defect as bad as murder.

I didn't see my mother lying strangled. They stopped me seeing her. I was frightened by their rigid faces, and I didn't object. I still fault myself for depriving her of having one last look. But I gather from what my aunt Bushra said that I formed an image of a tongue hanging out from between her lips, a bruised neck, and eyes bulging from their sockets. It was an image that grew more grotesque with time, punishing me for my evasion. So I

was afraid of my dead mother and afraid specifically of her death, of her lolling tongue and her bulging eyes. What I heard from my aunt Bushra about my mother, or what I gleaned from her, painted a very different image. My mother was a shopkeeper's daughter who was uppity toward her masters. She also had roving eyes that devoured men. In my presence Auntie Bushra made a point of praising my father, describing him as kind, and thereby holding my mother wholly responsible for what had happened to her. It was her crime and she had brought evil on herself. I never heard that from Uncle Jawad. As far as he was concerned my father was a monster and my mother was very beautiful, like a dove. This wasn't just what Uncle Jawad said. Many others said it in other ways. They said my father was a thug, a tyrant and as strong as a lion. Given the way he was they wouldn't rule out him hitting anyone, since that was his stock in trade. No one would be surprised if he hit out, or even if he hit a woman, since that was an aspect of hitting, and that was part of his power and his thuggery. A man like him needed a woman to submit to him and she had no right to do otherwise. They said my father was violent and quick to punish anyone who wouldn't obey him. And naturally those who didn't obey him deserved it. They had provoked his power and brought it to the surface. How much more so if they were close relatives, if it was his wife who had been disobedient? Wasn't that an insult to his power? Didn't he have to discipline her without hesitation? There were, however, people who condemned my father for killing an innocent woman, saying he had no right to kill her, even if she was spoiled and highly strung. I picked up things like this and it made me more puzzled. I didn't like my aunt Bushra or my other aunt, Khulood, or their children. I can't think of any reason why I don't like them, but I can't like them. Without taking an attitude I knew this was an atmosphere in which my mother felt stifled, and whatever the reason it was still a stifling atmosphere. I felt I couldn't find enough air to breathe there and I could sense from afar that the hatred for my mother was being projected onto me. Like her, I was weak and abandoned there. I didn't resemble her otherwise, though in the eyes of my father's relatives I was only her son. Only to some extent was I the son of my father, who had lost his home because of her and possibly because of me. They used to pick up news of him and grieve for him. The story of my mother's murder was long forgotten. Now the story was about a fugitive who roamed the hills and then went abroad. Khaled, my father's other brother, was usually the one who met him, gave him money and came back distressed. When he came back I felt hated. I didn't ask and I didn't want to know where he

was or what he was doing, but Uncle Khaled passed on his regards to me anyway. I was indifferent, and this irritated my father's brothers and their families. My silence when they spoke about my father made me seem insensitive and cruel to them. They had their reasons for disliking me: I had been born in that crime, as if I were its child. The sins that we bear unintentionally are the ones that appear on our faces.

Sins can be passed on by heredity or by contagion or we may even be born with them. The more I grew up the more I was my father's son. The way they looked at my hands changed, as if they could see blood or traces of blood on them. A crime, like love, requires two people, and if the first person can wash his hands, the second cannot remove the stigma from his face or the traces of the crime from his neck. It's complicated and we can't easily understand the responses to a crime. That's why my aunts Bushra and Taghrid insisted on burying my mother in the garden of the house, and neither my father's brothers nor Uncle Jawad disagreed with them. I didn't understand why they hadn't wanted them to carry her to the cemetery, or what that had to do with the crime. Did they want the crime to stay within the house? Under the pomegranate tree they had set a marble headstone engraved with a row of arches. In front of it was a rectangle that sloped down over supports either side and ended at the foot in a low, curved marker. Beside the grave there was a basin into which water flowed from a fountain, that was surrounded by blue when the water reflected the sky. I don't know why they insisted that everything should remain on my father's land until the conflict somehow came to an end. Were they worried the funeral might bring to light things they wouldn't be able to live with? Uncle Jawad wanted to pin the crime on them but my father's sisters wanted the affair to remain within the family and to be buried with her. After that Uncle Adel had a notion that it was improper, even heretical from a religious point of view, to turn a house into a burial place. He was thinking of moving into the house, or of making use of it in some way. But my father's sisters prevented him and my mother's brother wouldn't agree to his plan. The crime lay years in the past and it was indecorous to dig it up again. Besides, the crime was still unsolved, not a closed case, and to move the body would be to repeat the crime, to put a pair of hands around her twisted neck again.

*Translated by Jonathan Wright*

Winner of the Sheikh Zayed Book Award  
for Literature 2016

# *Beyond Writing*

## *by Ibrahim Abdel Meguid*

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Ibrahim Abdel Meguid was born in Alexandria, Egypt, in 1946. He graduated from Alexandria University with a Philosophy degree before relocating to Cairo in 1974 where he commenced his career in literature. He has written over 15 novels, five collections of short stories and some plays. His novels include *No One Sleeps in Alexandria*, *Birds of Amber*, and *The House of Jasmine*. His works have been well received around the world and have been translated to English, German, Italian, Spanish and French. He has received numerous prizes and awards, including the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature in 1996 for *The Other Place* and the Egyptian State Award in 2007 for his contribution to literature.

### *About the Book*

*Beyond Writing* narrates the author's experiences on which his novels were based and provides a creative view of the political, social and cultural contexts within which the books were written.

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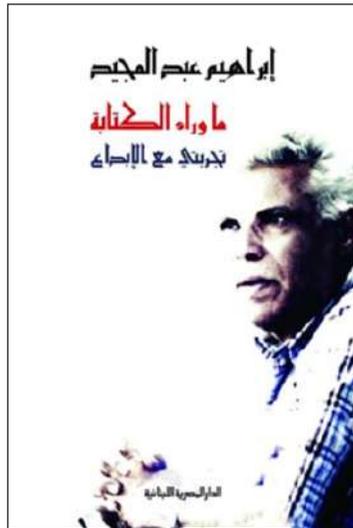
An excerpt from

## Beyond Writing

### Chapter 1: No One Sleeps in Alexandria

THE NOVEL *No One Sleeps in Alexandria* had its beginnings in 1958 when I was only around eleven years old.

I was with my father in the city of Burj al-‘Arab, about fifty kilometres southwest of Alexandria, when I saw a man walking to Libya on foot. It was during the month of Ramadan, in the summer months or thereabouts. My father had a work colleague, a Christian man named Ibrahim Salib, who held off eating during the day so that he could eat with my father during iftar. The man spotted the two of them eating in front of the railroad workers’ residence and walked up to them. I was with them. He sat down and began eating without saying a word. My father had provided enough food for everyone, and the man began talking with them, telling them how he was from al-Mahalla al-Kubra and was making his way to Libya on foot across the desert, in order to look for a steady job or a better life. That was the first time I had ever heard of anything like that. I remember they explained to him how to get there, loaded him up with food to take along, and gave him a few piastres. The days went by, and almost thirty years later, I wrote a short story with the title “He Knew the Names of the Towns”, which was published in 1989. Further detail about this incident would appear in a written treatment I put together when I was writing and preparing the novel *No One Sleeps in Alexandria*. It was a study of the north coast and the Western Desert, but I will tell you the story here first. Exactly the way it happened.



## He Knew the Names of the Towns

“Ibrahim, why are you looking at me?”

I must have felt shy. I remember I kept my head down, looking at the single plate of food on the rustic table. I dipped a piece of bread in and brought it to my mouth as I tilted my whole head back looking for something in the sky, but I couldn't see a single star.

“Ibrahim doesn't believe you're fasting and having iftar with me every day,” I heard my father say. I saw his colleague “Uncle Damien” smile. After that, we stopped talking. I heard the sound of teeth chewing on dry bread.

The expanse around us was big, and our silence was just as big. Not long before, I had seen the western horizon ablaze with flame, but now the horizon had disappeared. If not for the light from the kerosene lamp pouring out from the door above us, we might not have been able to see each other, except for when we spoke. But I could make out the nearby railway station, though it was extremely dark. Although the heat of day had begun to dissipate, I asked myself: “Will I really spend my entire summer vacation here with my father?” I was thinking back on my mother when Uncle Damien asked me: “Do you know who Khrushchev is, Ibrahim?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know why he came to Egypt?”

“He came to visit the High Dam project.”

“Smart kid.”

We were silent.

“Ibrahim did well in primary school – he got top grades this year,” my father said.

His throat rattled, and it seemed like he was choking. He started coughing hard and gestured to me to hand him the jug of water, from which he began drinking loudly. I was thinking about what had made him pronounce the words that had made my parents' divorce final. Why couldn't he bring her back this time? Also, why didn't Uncle Damien's wife want to stay in Alexandria, and why did she refuse to live with him here? Was Uncle Damien going to divorce his wife, too, I asked myself. But I saw my father, after he put the jug down next to him, looking out into the distance. I looked where he was looking and saw a man slowly approaching us. He was wearing a short black jacket. The man came closer and I saw that he had a very red face, framed by a tangled beard. He had a tangled moustache, too. He was wearing old sandals, was bald and was carrying a small bundle on his back.

“Please join us,” my father called out to him. Uncle Damien turned and saw the man, so he moved over to make room for him. I moved, too, and the man sat between us after leaving his bundle by the door.

The man offered us no greeting, nor did he shake hands with anyone. He just stretched out his hand and took a loaf of bread. He quickly began ripping it apart, and dipped a chunk into the food. We watched him as he then put the bread aside, brought the bowl up to his mouth, and drank the mulukhiyya down in a single gulp.

“Here’s to your health!” said Uncle Damien.

I saw the man look at my father, who quickly filled his bowl again from the big cooking pot beside him. The man drank it all up, so my father went and filled it up again. The man carried on helping himself to the mulukhiyya and bread and we went back to eating along with him in silence.

“Praise God,” said the man contentedly after taking in a deep breath and quietly exhaling it. Then he turned to my father.

“Do you have any cigarettes?” he asked.

“Cigarettes – and tea, too,” my father replied. He nodded at me to go inside and get a pack of cigarettes. I got to my feet and quickly returned with a pack of Hollywood cigarettes, but I found Uncle Damien giving them both cigarettes from his own pack. I left the pack with my father and went back inside, coming back with the things for making tea, which I began to make for them over the small burner stove. I heard my father tell the man: “Did you come here from al-Mahalla al-Kubra on foot?”

“Yes, and I’ll be continuing on to Libya. Do I still have far to go?”

“Very far,” Uncle Damien replied. Then he added: “But what got you this far will get you there, God willing.”

Everyone went quiet for a bit, until the man said: “The problem is that from here on I’ll be walking in the desert. Before, I was walking in the countryside. I don’t know what might happen to me after this.”

“The important thing is to stick close to the train tracks,” my father said.

Then Uncle Damien added: “Just about every ten miles you’ll find a train station, and a small residence for railroad workers like this one that we live in.”

“And of course,” my father chimed in, “you can stay the night as a guest of the people in the residence, and you can eat and drink like you did just now.”

The silence returned again. I passed the teapot to my father because he liked to pour it into the cups himself, and add the sugar the way he liked. I couldn’t help but look at the man’s face. He had piercing eyes. Why was

this man going to Libya on foot? What did he say to them while I was getting the things for tea from inside the residence? While my father began pouring tea into the cups, the man asked: "What's the name of this town?"

"Burj al-'Arab," my father replied.

"Next is al-Gharbaniyyat, and then al-Hammam," Uncle Damien added.

"I've heard of this al-Hammam," the man said.

"You must have heard of El Alamein, El Dabaa, Sidi Galal, and Mersa Matrouh," my father said as he handed him a cup of tea.

"In fact, I've heard of all of them, and of Sallum, too, at the border."

He took a long swig of tea.

"So you know them better than we do," Uncle Damien said. "You'll get there, God willing."

I saw my father stand up. He tugged at my sleeve, so I stood up and went into the residence with him. He told me to put some loaves of dry bread in a palm-leaf basket, and to bring three big pieces from the slab of areesh cheese and put them in the basket, too. "This man is a traveller on the road, Ibrahim," he told me.

We went back out and my father set the basket down next to the man, who had finished drinking his tea. My father poured him another cup.

"So you left behind your wife and children," Uncle Damien said.

"They are in God's hands."

He quickly drank the second cup and stood up, holding the basket in one hand and his bag in the other. I saw my father put a quarter of an Egyptian pound in his jacket pocket. Then he dropped the pack of Holly-wood cigarettes into the palm-leaf basket.

"Hold on a moment," said Uncle Damien.

He hurried off inside, only to return with a small water flask in one hand, and in the other a quarter of an Egyptian pound that he also put in the man's pocket. Then he put the flask in the basket.

"How can you walk through the desert without any water?" he said with a smile on his face.

I don't know what was going through the man's head at the time, but I saw him bow low, humbly, and I saw Uncle Damien pick his pack of al-Ma'dan cigarettes from the ground and put them in the basket.

"Forgive me," the man said.

"We were hoping you could stay with us tonight," my father offered.

"I'll walk at night and I'll sleep during the day."

And having said that, he set out walking in the darkness without saying goodbye.

1989

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Shortly after writing the story “He Knew the Names of the Towns,” about this solitary traveller in the desert, I began to write the novel that took me six years to complete. But there was another reason for writing it. It was as if the universe understood the wish that had been turning over in my soul, and the dam broke. So I came to believe in perseverance.

In the summer of 1990, I was on my way to Mersa Matrouh with my family to spend a week there. I stopped the car in El Alamein to take a short break at a small cafeteria. Directly ahead of me I spotted the small El Alamein Museum. Here my eyes widened in amazement. The distant past began to awaken. Here was where the decisive World War II battle had taken place. I took my family to the museum and began telling them stories about the war. We left the museum so that I could take them on to the Commonwealth War Cemetery. My young children scattered among the graves, laughing and no longer listening to me. My oldest began taking pictures of them and of us. I wandered off, well away from them, and thought back on my father. The children returned and sat in the cafeteria with their mother, while I found myself walking on until I reached the small railway station. I found it unchanged, just as my father had described it to me. The only difference was some small houses on the road that hadn't been there during the war. The Bedouin lived far from town and the increase in their numbers must have led their homes to creep up close to the station. I went back to my family. My wife looked at me and asked me where I had wandered off to so mysteriously. I told her I was reminiscing about my father and the World War here. I would end up returning from Mersa Matrouh and starting to write a novel I had often dreamed of writing, about the Second World War. But as usual, I only started writing after summer ended.

I knew that I would be writing a different kind of novel. And I would find myself immersed in the atmosphere of tolerance that shaped people's lives in the city throughout its history. Even under death and destruction. But this knowledge about the city's history, which was a spur to my writing – as were memories – was no substitute for trying to go there. To the time and place of the novel itself. To the year 1939, when the world war began, until the end of 1942 when the Axis armies were defeated at El Alamein

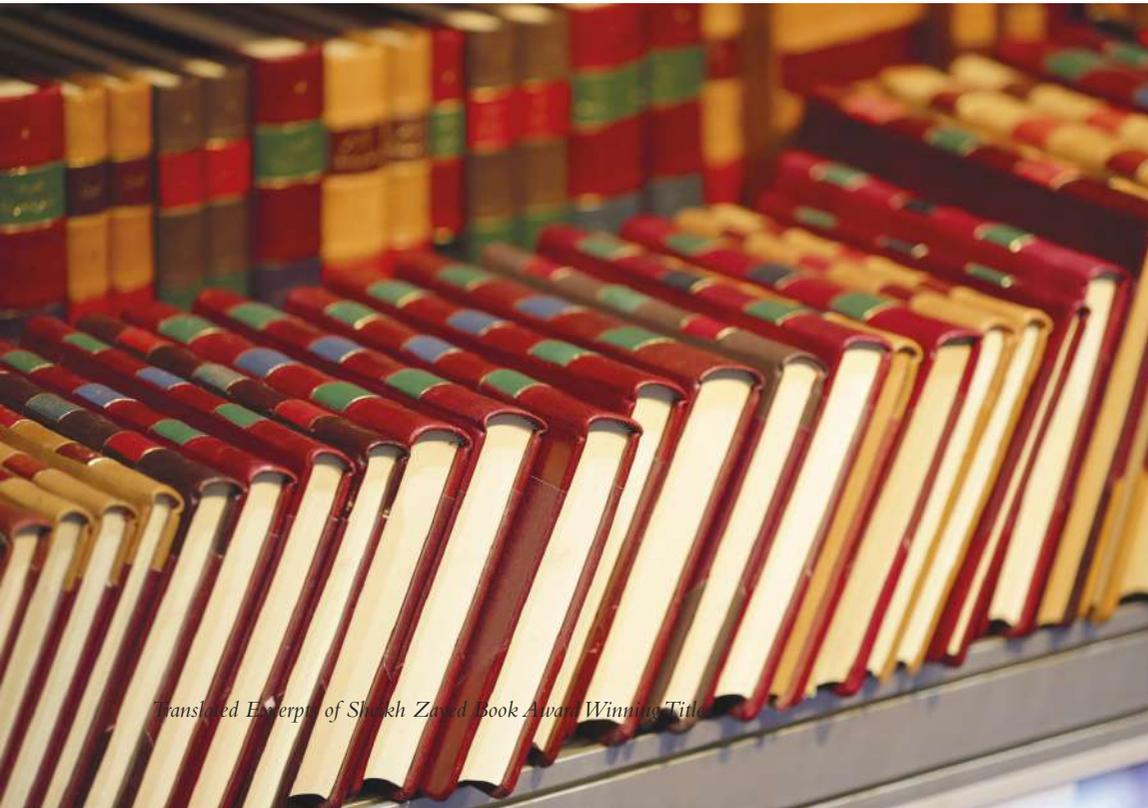
and withdrew from Africa entirely. How did people live their lives day after day? Historical and political knowledge by itself wasn't enough. Daily life was to be the essence of the novel. So I made my way to Dar al-Kutub, Egypt's national library, on the Corniche in Bulaq. I began my journey with newspapers. Specifically, with *Al-Ahram* newspaper, which I found was the one most concerned with what was going on in Egypt and the world. I read each day's edition, from the beginning of September 1939 until the end of November 1942. I was interested in major events. Indeed, also small, run-of-the-mill and even strange things. And I started taking notes on those political and wartime events which I thought would be right for the novel. Most important was the daily life of Egyptians in general and Alexandrians in particular. The prices for everything – even the price of a box of matches; the brand names of all kinds of clothes; the names of films shown in theatres; plays; makes of cars; the names of Egyptian and world-famous actors, authors, journalists, and musicians; different kinds of sports that Egyptians played and their matches; the names of social clubs and nightclubs; newspapers and other magazines; published books; radio programmes; issues that engaged people, and everyday occurrences. Murder or robbery or other crimes, and different kinds of clothes and fashions and even men's and women's underwear and the names of famous shops, cafes, advertisements, drinks and everything that brought that time to life for me. I found I had a burning enthusiasm within me, so that I expected to finish the novel quickly, and I went to the excellent author Mustafa Nabil (now deceased), at the time the editor-in-chief of *Al-Hilal* magazine, and told him about my project. I told him that 1992 would be the fiftieth anniversary of the battle and there would no doubt be a great celebration for those foreign soldiers who were still alive, or for their families and the nations that took part in it, or at least the ones that were victorious in the war. And so the novel could be published in October that same year – the anniversary of the start of the battle. We agreed on that, but I only went back to him in April 1996. "You're four years too late, my friend!" he said, and we both laughed. I told him a little about what I had done, and why I was late in delivering it. It wasn't just the information I was collecting from newspapers, but it was also the trips I took to Alexandria in general, and specifically to locations where events took place, as well as trips to the North Coast as far as to Mersa Matrouh. I was doing that almost once a month.

I made numerous visits to the working-class neighbourhoods in Alexandria where I had spent my childhood and teenage years. At night I would

visit them and at dawn I would go by homes to breathe in their scent, when people were asleep. I would go out to look for a coffeeshop that never closed, so I could sit and watch people leave their homes in the morning to go to work, and watch women come out to their balconies to take the laundry in or hang it out to dry. I did that once a month in the winter, as I said, but in the summer I would do it every week, and sometimes every day, when my family and I lived in the city over a long period. I visited the Commonwealth War Cemetery a number of times and walked far off into the desert. I took off my shoes and walked barefoot so I could feel the touch of the sand. I did all of that in the summer, winter, spring, and fall, and both day and night. In that way I let my soul be saturated with the experience of it all. I knew that all of that would show up in the novel without me having to point it out. All five senses would make their appearance in it, breathing in the scent of the setting and experiencing the flavour of its time period. I travelled to all the places the novel would touch on in Egypt. Among my travels, at some distance from Alexandria and the North Coast, was a visit to the Monastery of the Virgin in the village of Durunka in Assiut. It is the convent where Camilia ends up after her romance with the Muslim character Rushdi is complicated by her family's refusal, compounded by their surprise and their rural origins. So she sees no other way but to become a nun and to keep her distance from the entire world. The two of them had been students in secondary school: neither of them knew the other's religion until later, but that didn't stop them. They fell headlong into a tumultuous romantic love. Camilia decides to join the convent so she can later become a nun. Rushdi takes it upon himself to look for her and wanders around the country from Alexandria on foot until he reaches the convent in Assiut. I went to visit the monastery so I could visualize the scene of their meeting. I walked around inside the monastery with one of the monks, who explained its history to me and how the Virgin Mary hid herself there with her son, the Messiah, and how she sometimes reveals herself in the form of a light that moves along the walls. I found that the monastery had originally been a cave carved into the mountain by ancient Egyptians, and that they would climb up to it when the Nile was in flood. Between the monastery and the village was a steep slope, which I used in the novel by having people stand on it awaiting the appearance of the new Sister Camilia who now had the miraculous ability to heal the sick, and who on several nights had seen the Virgin reveal herself. From the guidance of the Virgin's light, Camilia could see Rushdi approaching on foot through the countryside, until he came to her and

stood with the crowds that were waiting for her blessing. She blessed him and both of them realized that their love story was over. She returned to the monastery, where she secluded herself, only speaking to people with gestures. It was the excellent visit to the monastery that gave me plenty of inspiration. The writer Hala el-Badry accompanied me there. In fact, we were at a cultural conference in Assiut, and I told her I wanted to visit the monastery, so she came along with me.

The shape of the front page of *Al-Ahram* led me to the shape of the novel. At the top was a headline about the war and the latest catastrophe in the world, such as “80,000 British Soldiers Surrender in Singapore to Japanese Forces”. Or “Attacks on Poland Are to Blame for the Release of Predatory Animals from Zoo”. Or “100,000 Killed Outside Stalingrad” or “Nazi Forces Burn Thousands of Prisoners in the Soviet Union”. Or “Japanese Planes Attack Pearl Harbour”, or other major wartime events. On the right side of the page was a detail taken from the main news story, and on the left side were other, less bloody news items, although they were about war and death, too. It was the same below the fold, but in the middle of it, amid all this destruction, would be a photo of the American actress Hedy Lamarr in a bathing suit, and a question: “Is Hedy Lamarr Getting



Married Again Now That Her Husband Is Dead?” Or the photo of a beautiful girl in a bikini, and beneath it “The Discovery of a New Face in Cinema – Susan Hayward on Miami Beach”. It was always like that, every day: beautiful women’s faces looking out at us amid the destruction. At the bottom right-hand side of the page was an ad for a sexual restorative, and on the left was an ad for bottled beer, or other ads that celebrated life. From this splendid front page came the shape of the novel and the way to write it. The way I made notes in this case was different from the way I made the first notes for my novel *In the Summer of '67*, which was for their political significance. No. Here I was trying to grab hold of life. A news story about Hitler, followed by a news story about a brothel or one about Churchill, followed by a review of a movie or a play. An article about the king, followed by one about a barber or a train conductor, so that you find yourself thinking only about this life, and how it went merrily along in the midst of war. Of course, I wasn’t satisfied with that, so I went back to some other newspapers, such as *Al-Musawwar* and *Al-Akhbar*, but *Al-Ahram* was my main source. I also went through many books by politicians and military leaders, as well as studies about society and other books about that era. Events of those days took hold of me and I was so fully engrossed in the novel that I started calling people close to me by the names of the characters in it. Some of them were puzzled by that, but they didn’t ask me why – out of awkwardness, perhaps, or kindness, but mostly out of bafflement. The only one who did was the waiter at the al-Bustan coffeeshop, who asked me: “Mr. Ibrahim, sir, who is this Damien you keep calling me?” The waiter’s name was Imam – I had known that, of course, for years, but that’s just how it was. Although I laughed about it, I went back to calling him Damien, sometimes intentionally so we could have a laugh, but often times without meaning to. I decided that my historical novel would start off without any preconceived ideas. I had become so mixed up with the novel’s characters and its world that it took me outside the real world, and I lived through their amazing era along with them.

*Translated by Chip Rossetti*

# *The Madmen of Bethlehem* by Osama Alaysa



Osama Alaysa is an author and journalist, born in Bethlehem, Palestine, in 1963. He has worked as a journalist for numerous Arab and regional newspapers, as well as publishing five novels, two collections of short stories, many essays, and seven research studies on Palestinian history and culture.

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## *About the Book*

This novel is a unique literary creation that narrates the history of a place and traces the changes it went through by using the motif of madness in such a way that reflects an entire intellectual period in the Arab world. It finds inspiration from traditional narrative forms as such as those of the *One Thousand and One Nights* as well as making use of more recent narrative techniques, perceptively linking history and reportage, and mixing realistic presentation with magical realism. The wealth of character types and of subsidiary tales harmonizes beautifully with the main narrative line.

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*An excerpt from*

## *The Madmen of Bethlehem*

Al-'Abd 'Alawi

THERE WAS a group of patients in the psychiatric hospital, let's call them the fourth group, who were allowed to leave the hospital and go home. The members of this group could often be seen walking aimlessly in the streets. People belonging to this group could also usually be identified by their constant begging for cigarettes – so much so that I started to believe in a contingent link between madness and smoking. There wasn't a single madman whose mouth didn't hold a forgotten cigarette. With so much smoking, the cigarettes would burn his lips until his teeth became yellow and decayed, and his face sunken and emaciated – though this was most likely not through smoking, or at least smoking was not the only reason.

Among this group of patients was al-'Abd 'Alawi, a young man with the appearance of a smart intellectual of the sixties generation, tall and thin, usually wearing a white shirt and black trousers, with glasses. He looked a bit like the existentialist philosopher Sartre, and indeed he was greatly influenced by him.

Al-'Abd 'Alawi was a member of my family in the camp. His father was my mother's uncle. As usual in a society that attached importance to family and tribe, the young people called those older than themselves 'uncle', and our mothers insisted that this was required by good manners. So it was my



luck, or perhaps his, that I should call him ‘uncle’, although he was an uncle different from any other. Like everyone else, I knew that he was mad, although at the same time he wasn’t just any old madman as far as we were concerned.

Al-‘Abd ‘Alawi’s father worked in the UNRWA mill, where he ground wheat for people. For children like us, Uncle ‘Alawi’s mill was the place we made for on the way back from school to have fun weighing ourselves on the big scales.

Uncle ‘Alawi quite often got annoyed with us, especially when one of us brought a dozen or so other children with him, to show them the uncle who was in charge of a set of scales that could tell people their weight when they stood on them. That was a power that we had for a long time regarded as enormous.

Generally, though, Uncle ‘Alawi was quiet and subdued. The glint in his eyes had gone out some time ago, as it had with all the refugees who had, like him, lost their land and found themselves in refugee camps, after being used to working their land and living off its produce.

Despite the apathy that had overtaken him, the women of the family continued to discern in him his former manliness and fatherly spirit, and they were afraid of him, even though he did not try to impose anything on them. It seems they were in need of a particular sort of manhood so that they could feel downtrodden and have more and more wretchedness piled upon them until they became completely ground down.

The women of the family, as well as the men, had for a long time looked to Uncle ‘Alawi as the ‘chief’, and this feeling had made its way to us children as well. This was not without some justification, for this uncle could be guaranteed to beat up another ‘uncle’ called Bashir – one of the many ‘uncles’ the nature of whose relationship to us I did not know. When we were young, we used to describe this Bashir as a ‘roaring drunk’. He worked in the Bethlehem bars, and would often come back home drunk and angry, eager to pick a quarrel with the walls. He would start hitting, smashing and shouting like a madman until his wife, Aunt Zainab, would send one of us boys to quickly fetch Uncle ‘Alawi. Uncle ‘Alawi would immediately stir himself and arrive in record time, whatever he had been busy with. He knew his task well: it was to deal Uncle Bashir the repeated blows we all believed could be guaranteed to make him come round and stop the foul talk he directed at his wife and neighbours when drunk.

Several people who had arrived at Bashir’s house before Uncle ‘Alawi had tried to restore Bashir to his senses but, despite using considerable force,

they had all failed. Instead, Bashir became more ferocious, like a hunted animal in relation to the force confronting him, until Uncle 'Alawi arrived. Muttering prayers and verses from the Qur'an, he would calmly ask for the path in front of him to be cleared, as he grabbed the dreadful Bashir like an empty bag and slapped him hard, until Bashir came round and gave in to him. Then Uncle 'Alawi would ask Zainab, with great pride and dignity, to take her husband and shut the door behind the two of them and their children. "That's enough scandal!" he would say angrily. But the scandals never stopped, for Bashir carried on drinking wine and getting drunk, even though, as he got older, he had started going to the mosque to pray. That was something completely different, though. He often used to say: "God will punish me for one thing and reward me for the other. Who knows? Perhaps I will be better in his eyes than the sheikhs, with their lies and discord?"

Contrary to his expectations, Uncle 'Alawi became famous for his ability to sort things out with a blow. People started to visit him – for example, a man struck in the face by a fierce gust of wind of the sort that can cause hemiplegia, whom he hit, not realising that he should be treated by massage, as is done today for people suffering after that sort of exposure. His blows were not limited to people with medical conditions, of which there were many, he also treated people possessed by jinn or sprites, some known and others unknown. Despite his increasing renown, and the increasing number of his visitors, he refused to take any fee for what he regarded as a divine gift by which he could benefit people, being content with his reputation, people's prayers, and securing his status among them.

Like Uncle 'Alawi, his son, al-'Abd, was extremely calm. He had inherited his height, but unlike his father, the cigarettes never left his hand, and ash burns from the smoke were visible on his yellowed fingers as well as on his lips while his teeth had lost their whiteness, if they had ever been white at all.

What distinguished al-'Abd 'Alawi from the other patients was his pride in a small transistor radio, with a strap he attached to his wrist. When he walked, one could see the radio swinging from his hand, and when he sat on a chair or on the ground and stretched himself out, he would put the radio to his ear.

Al-'Abd 'Alawi suffered from a tremor in his feet, which became noticeable when he sat down and put one foot on top of the other. The foot on top wouldn't stop shaking, though it didn't cure him of holding cigarettes. I came across this sort of involuntary movement of the foot later in a pris-

oner who had proved uncooperative during an investigation in the occupation prisons and been subjected to severe punishment. His interrogators violated him by putting an empty bottle up his anus in revenge, and when he came out he could never control the movement of his feet.

It is true that al-‘Abd was quiet, but that didn’t mean he didn’t often want to speak, or rather argue, with the girls and boys of the family. His cultural horizons were astonishingly wide. He made no secret of his embrace of existentialism and his admiration for Sartre and other names of people that those he was speaking with had never heard of before and that they never remembered. When he was faced with questions about existentialism that he didn’t hesitate to describe as being stupid, he would rush to answer them with explanations of subjects like ‘atheistic’ and ‘believing’ existentialism, and details of the existentialist philosophers. Among those he mentioned, for example, was the pre-Islamic poet Tarafa ibn al-‘Abd, whom he greatly admired. I have no doubt now that Tarafa’s premature death, the story of which al-‘Abd often related, had affected him deeply.

Al-‘Abd ‘Alawi’s own story, which went before him to the houses of the family and which contained within it a good deal of distress, was that he had been gifted and industrious at school, and that it was this supposed outstanding intelligence that had led him to madness instead of to the universities.

Al-‘Abd ‘Alawi’s colleagues had drifted away both before and after June 1967, and unlike him, most of them had been influenced by Marxism and nationalism. I was not destined to meet any of them until many years later in the Jordanian capital Amman. When I asked my informant about al-‘Abd ‘Alawi, he was surprised by the question but confirmed to me the story about school and how he had begun to go mad. He had told my friend – my informant – that when he heard the sound of birds tweeting, he became sexually aroused . . . “And he immediately came, and felt relief when he had ejaculated.”

Al-‘Abd’s old friend told me that laughing. He didn’t need anything apart from this confession from al-‘Abd, either before or after, to realise that he really was mad.

I said to my informant: “If al-‘Abd is as you say, then he is a poet and not a madman.”

“Every poet is a madman in the end,” he replied laughing.

I laughed and recalled the poet Bahija, who used to say proudly that she was the fastest woman to come, and often interrupted our telephone conversations to say “Ummm”, before calming down a bit so that we could

resume our conversation. This was after telling me that she had wet herself. It was always impossible to count the number of times Bahija had wet herself during a single phone conversation.

I knew nothing about al-'Abd's sexual or emotional desires, but I recall that he gave especial attention to the girls of the family. This did not reach the stage of explicit flirting or harassment – so far as I know, at least – but anyway, he succeeded in forming friendships with them, because as an intellectual he believed in friendship between a man and a woman. There was also another reason, namely, his readiness to listen to them without their being anxious in case he might spill their secrets. If he did so, it might well be annoying, but it would not be a major upset, for in the end he was a madman, and he could say many things that were not necessarily true.

I often listened to his arguments about things like friendship between a man and a woman; equality; his criticism of popular Marxism as a fashion; his embrace of existentialism, and his opposition to the Soviets because – despite their loudly proclaiming ideas of liberation, which al-'Abd had never believed – they were the first to recognise Israel. There were also endless conversations about civilisation, progress, religion and modernity.

Al-'Abd passed his days between his house, the houses of his family, the streets of Dheisheh and Bethlehem, and the psychiatric hospital where he received treatment. The treatment might not amount to the terrifying electric shocks that were widely used, or severe beatings from nurses, perhaps because in the last resort he was a child of Dheisheh, a child of the camp, that is, and he had some support – unlike those patients who came from other areas further away, who were usually left by their families in the hospital to face their fate alone, unasked about. Such families only saw them twice, once when they signed their committal documents, and once when they received their corpses for burial. On several occasions they were so slow to collect the corpses that they were buried in any grave that could be arranged. Sometimes a nurse or some charitable soul would volunteer to accept the corpse and bury it in their family graves.

It often happened that we visited him in the hospital to find that he had for a long period disappeared somewhere. We would wander in the direction of the convent and make for the 'sane insane' department – as we used to call it in accordance with the classification we had invented (it was actually called the 'convalescence unit') – where the inmates who were not dangerous were housed.

There we would sit with al-'Abd under a shady tree, or wander along the dirt track, shaded by pine trees on either side. I recall al-'Abd's pleasure

at our presence, and I don't recall his being particularly miserable when we finished our visit – unlike the other patients who, if they had enjoyed a visit from their relatives, would cling to them and beg them to take them out of the hospital, on the basis that they themselves were perfectly sane but if left among the insane, they would certainly be driven mad. A high-pitched scream would sound out, which would quickly change into a plea until the matter was settled by nurses in white uniforms, who would drag the now tearful patients to their rooms.

Was al-'Abd concealing his sorrow at leaving us, with a pride and self-respect that he could not show, especially as on most visits we would have with us a number of the older girls of the family, with whom he liked to sit and show off his cultured views, just as they in turn were making him fond of that something inside of him that attracted us all to him?

Besides the men's 'sane insane' section, I remember that there was a 'sane insane' section for women. I once went to visit al-'Abd with some of the older girls of the family, who were always needing young men like me to accompany them when they went on an errand, as if we were *maharim* (to use the religious expression) – people who could render it acceptable for women to go out in those days. When we reached the hospital, we could not find al-'Abd. I don't know how it was that the opportunity arose to sit with two of these women patients, who were dressed up to the nines. The conversation revolved around a single topic: love. It was like a conversation just between girls, for they ignored my presence. Each patient spoke about her beloved and about her ambition to tie the knot when she left the hospital. The conversation turned to the meaning and nature of love, to lust, sacrifice and faithfulness, and to the difference between love and sex. All the girls of the family and the two patients agreed that love had to be love for its own sake, love for the sake of love, unsullied by certain desires. It was as if an adult – an adult of the family or any adult with a certain authority – were present among us. Every one of the girls, mad or sane, was anxious that they should not be constrained by any suspicion of a connection between sex and love.

The surprise came when one of the 'sane madwomen' revealed her love for a 'sane madman' living in the hospital and talked about how to avoid the attention of the male and female nurses in order to pass messages of love and desire between them. She was assisted in that by her fellow inmates and those of her beloved – among them al-'Abd, whose virtues and character the patient extolled highly. She regarded him as the master and spiritual director of their love story, which had reached point at which the pair

had agreed on names for their children when their luck turned, one of whom would be called al-‘Abd.

I have forgotten, and will continue to forget, many important and moving incidents that I experienced in prison, in the street, and among the Palestinian diaspora, but I will never forget that mentally disturbed girl, her appetite for life, her elegance, her way of smoking, and her passion for her mad lover. I imagined that she was sick with love. Later, she seemed to me like one of al-Manfaluti’s or Muhammad ‘Abd al-Halim ‘Abd Allah’s heroines. Perhaps some of the resounding expressions that I heard from her were actually taken from books by al-Manfaluti or Mustafa Sadiq al-Rafi’i or Ihsan ‘Abd al-Quddus. The last-mentioned, together with Yusuf al-Siba’i, was among the favourite writers of the girls of the family, some of whom knew off by heart sentences the authors had written. I found that out when one of them read a letter that had reached her from another girl’s lover – ignoring the fact that I was there, as always happened – and the other girl stopped her at a particular sentence or expression and said “Ihsan” with a laugh, meaning that the lover had stolen it from the famous author to express his love for that girl.

After that visit, word got around – I have no idea how serious it was – about the possibility that al-‘Abd ‘Alawi might marry a fellow inmate.

It may be that that talk reached al-‘Abd, but it didn’t induce him to change his position. It seems he realised that the extent of his present and future life was to move between the camp and the hospital and to listen to the radio, with endless arguments, non-stop smoking, and the birds that never stopped chirping.

My acquaintance with al-‘Abd ‘Alawi now seems like a mere flash of light that quickly extinguished itself, for one day, like a thunderbolt, there arrived a sudden piece of news that nevertheless seemed to have been expected:

“Al-‘Abd ‘Alawi has committed suicide . . . in the pools.”

I headed with several others to Solomon’s Pools, where the Lama Brothers acted and produced their film. It consists of three enormous pools situated beside our camp, and it forms part of the water system that has supplied Jerusalem with water by means of aqueducts for more than two thousand years. There is no doubt that whoever invented it wanted to bring to fruition a mad idea that had occurred to him. It may have been the Roman Emperor Hadrian who did it – the Emperor who destroyed Jerusalem and rebuilt it in AD 135 to mark the twenty-first anniversary of his succession to power. He gave it the name Aelia Capitolina, which is an

amalgamation of the name of his family and the name of the Roman God Jupiter – a name that the Arabs abbreviated to Aelia without understanding it. Yaqut al-Hamawi, for example, explains the name as if it were “Beit El”, saying: “Aelia is the name of the Beit al-Miqdas. Its name is said to mean ‘God’s House’.”

The important thing is we found out that al-‘Abd’s body had been discovered in the middle pool. He had left his spectacles, radio and tin of tobacco on the edge of the pool, which is the only certain thing in the story. The conclusion was that he had decided to commit suicide and had jumped into the massive pool, which was full of vegetation and not fit to swim in.

Al-‘Abd was not the first person from our camp or the area around it to commit suicide in the pools. People talked a lot, for example, about the suicide of an outstanding talented student who did not get the expected grades in his secondary school exams, which came as a shock to him. He probably couldn’t face a domineering father who wanted to see his son make it in life, after time had treated him so badly and turned him into a refugee expelled from his land. He didn’t want his son to repeat his own wretched life. In those circumstances, the son thought that the quickest and simplest solution would be to end his own life by his own hand, so he



committed suicide in Solomon's Pools, which had often seen suicides and drownings, including of some Jews. Each year without fail we had an appointment with death in these pools of blood, the point where water is brought into Jerusalem – the so-called 'House of God', which writers and travellers have fallen in love with and lived beside, and which has been an inevitable focus for invaders. The revolutionaries lured the soldiers of Ibrahim Pasha to the area and slaughtered them, and the British brought a purification pump, which they had captured from the Germans in the Sahara. The system for supplying water to Jerusalem worked until the war of 1948 and the partition of Jerusalem, whose eastern part was assigned to the defeated party and the western part to those who had won the war.

From our experience with suicides and drownings, we knew that the body of a suspected suicide or drowned person settles on the bottom, and only becomes visible after several days, when it becomes bloated with water and rises to the surface. Then we know that someone has committed suicide or drowned. In al-'Abd's case, his glasses and radio were immediate evidence of his identity, even before the corpse became visible.

When I recall the affair now, I wonder: Why did al-'Abd put his most obvious identification marks on the edge before taking his decision? Why didn't he just jump into the pool with all his things? Did he want to leave



a coded message as a sort of will? Did he want to say to us: Look, I'm leaving you something of myself for you to remember me by? Or did he want his identity to be established quickly, so that he wouldn't be left alone for a long time in the darkness at the bottom of the pool?

I know that I shall never be able to know the final moments in the life of al-'Abd, as he stood on the edge of the enormous Roman pool, under the tall trees. Maybe it was after night had fallen when he stood alone facing the water, and life. Perhaps he had some sense of the historical and archaeological symbolism of the place. Perhaps his life flashed in front of his eyes. Perhaps he thought of his father and his reaction, and of his mother, whom we described as being "*ala niyyatha*", a local expression meaning that she was miserable, or weak-minded, or submissive, or a mixture of all three.

I don't recall how long it took to retrieve al-'Abd's body, which was taken to his home accompanied by the police, as the women of the family started wailing for the young man whose life was ended. The women of the family were faithful to the traditional mourning customs, which were rooted in antiquity. These customs were not confined to wailing and tears, and rehearsing the virtues of the deceased, but also required the organising of collective circles for flagellation, and the repetition of mournful death chants. They would stand in a circle with a woman in the middle, holding her head scarf in her hand, leading them and keeping the rhythm of the sorrowful verses, so that a visitor who saw these circles from a distance would actually think that he was watching a happy occasion.

Their voices, as they mourned al-'Abd and described him as "*zarif al-tul*" – whose life and power and everything about him had now been extinguished – still continue to haunt me, making me indescribably sad.

After al-'Abd's suicide, no one mentioned him anymore, as if his fate had been predestined, as if his death was something expected, I don't know why. Perhaps it was because the family had lost a large number of its menfolk who had died young, either drowning in the Atlantic, or from a virus in the Arabian desert, or from disease or suicide, as was the case with Ilyas, who set fire to himself for love.

Can passion kill? Some people would say yes, and I will say: Perhaps. I sat in my mother's lap amidst the women mourning Ilyas after his suicide, without knowing the details of what had driven this Don Juan to his death. Later, I had the idea that he might have wanted to put some particular pressure on his beloved, and set fire to himself in the hope that someone would notice it and put it out. Or perhaps he was intending to put it out but matters got out of control.

I have known cases of young men and women – perhaps as many as the fingers on both hands – who have decided to commit suicide for love but been saved at the last moment, as well as of young men who have actually committed suicide. I was with a Christian friend in the Augusta Victoria Hospital, that fortress of the German Empire on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem: he was saved after taking an overdose of pills to put pressure on his Muslim girlfriend to marry him. And I have known a handful of cases of people who have gone the whole way and lost their lives for love. I once found myself standing in a hospital courtyard with the father of a friend who had committed suicide because of his beloved. Both of us knew that the man now lying inside was already dead when we brought him to the hospital, but without saying anything, we had both entertained the hope of seeing him emerge bright and smiling. He came out the following day, after the completion of some routine but deadly formalities, carried on our shoulders to his final resting place.

But can madness kill?

In the hospital, crimes of murder occurred. Some patients killed others. I heard the story of one patient killing another patient who had been a doctor but had gone mad and become a fellow inmate of the people he had been treating. It seems that the killer harboured a secret grudge for the doctor who was previously sane but had later gone mad. So he chose a suitable time, slid out a knife, and poured out his hatred in a series of knife thrusts.

But in al-‘Abd’s case, the surprise for me was when I read a psychiatric specialist (or so the publisher described him) as saying that a madman does not commit suicide, for suicide requires a decision, and a madman is incapable of taking a decision like that. Only the sane commit suicide.

So al-‘Abd was not mad. I had always known that he was a madman of a specific type, or had been hiding behind his madness from a life in which no one understood him. And so he possessed the will to decide, before putting his glasses, cigarettes and radio on the edge of the Roman pool and jumping in. Most likely, he wasn’t mad in the same way as the rest of the hospital inmates, he was just tickled by the cheeping of the birds.

No, he was a poet, and also mad like Bahija, borne aloft to the seventh heaven by the chirping of the birds.

*Translated by Paul Starkey*

# Summer Rains

by Ahmad Al-Qarmalawi



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Ahmad Al Qarmalawi is an Egyptian novelist and short story writer, born in Cairo in 1978. In early childhood, he

moved with his family to Kuwait, where he received his elementary and secondary education, and in 1996 graduated from the International American School. He moved back to Egypt to study Architecture at the American University in Cairo, and later continued post-graduate studies at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. He has been writing since 2012 when he published his first work, a short story collection, *The First of Abbas*, which was launched at the 2013 Cairo Book Fair. It was followed by his first novel, *The Last Post*, published in 2014 by Al Dar Al Masriah Al Lubnaniah. He has two further novels, *Destino* (2015) and *Amtar Sayfiyyah* (2017, Summer Rains), winner of the 2018 Sheikh Zayed Book Award. Besides writing, he is an avid painter and a musician.

## About the Book

*Summer Rains* addresses interrelations between the music and the soul, and the sublimity of the spirit versus covetousness. Its characters must choose between the pursuit of materialism or finding a spiritual balance. The author's extensive knowledge of the history of music from ancient Sufi tones to present-day electronic techniques creates a tangible setting in which to explore the paradoxes of modern life and their impact on traditional culture.

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*An excerpt from*  
*Summer Rains*

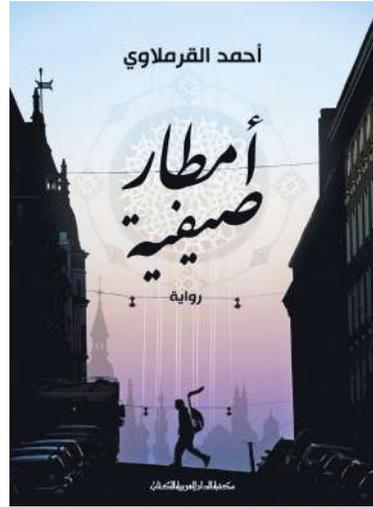
EVER SINCE Zayna had said she wanted to talk, Youssef had been eager to meet with her. Maybe it was curiosity, or maybe it was that strange magnetism she had, which made one want to say yes to anything she asked. After receiving her message that morning, he was surprised to find how cagey he was about their arrangement, especially toward Rahma.

Shortly before the appointed time, he was standing inside the café taking in his surroundings. It was a café unlike anything he'd ever seen before, tucked away on the first floor of a residential building in the Zamalek quarter. As

soon as he stepped through the door and had a glance at the interior he was overcome by a sense of surprise. A pungent smell of incense wafting incongruously through harsh modernist décor. Suggestive dim lighting that seemed to allude to all sorts of possibilities. The walls lined all along with pictures of whirling dervishes, staring back mutely in the murky light.

“I’m here for Zayna Dinari,” he informed the girl at the reception.

She told him to hold on, and within moments Zayna was popping out of a back room adjoining the management suite. That took him aback, but he had no opportunity to ask questions, as she instantly swept him up with that riotous, almost raucous, charisma of hers. As she led him to a table in what she said was her “favourite corner”, his eyes followed the undulating lines of her golden mane which swished downward and tapered off like an arrow pointing to her sculpted waist, just where her cropped top met



her high-waisted jeans. With every step she took, a pale sliver of bare skin would show through.

Youssef felt relieved when they finally took their seats across from each other at a secluded table and half of her charms vanished from sight under the red table cloth. He could now redeploy his defences.

“Not a bad place,” he began, just to roll away the initial silence.

“I was hoping you’d like it. I chose it because it struck me as a cross between our worlds: your mystical Sufi world and the real world.”

He smiled. “Wh—who said I live in a different world? Besides, this place couldn’t have less to do with Sufis.”

“You mean, all those dervishes don’t convince you? What about the engravings on the ceiling? And what about the prayer beads dangling from the lamps – you don’t like them?”

He contemplated these points for a moment and then said: “I like them, but not because they have a Sufi style. In fact, I don’t believe there’s such a thing as a ‘Sufi style’. Sufism is a way of being, which can be taken anywhere in the world and to all kinds of people.”

“So you’re not just a virtuoso musician . . .” she broke off as the waiter came up to them and laid her personal things on the table – her mobile, her handbag, her slim feminine cigarette case. She quickly took out a cigarette, lit up using the candle that sat on one side of the table, and then asked in a friendly tone: “Would you like to drink something?”

“Maybe in a little while.”

She blew out a gentle puff of smoke towards him and said: “So, let’s cut to the chase.”

“O-of course.”

“Tell me about your plans for the future.”

“My ‘plans’! I-I don’t have a blueprint as far as that goes, I’m just looking for a greater sense of stability and fulfilment. I have an unfinished MA thesis hanging over me, and then I’d like to find a job at the Academy or the Opera House. I’m still living off my father’s pension and the way the cost of living keeps rising that won’t last forever.”

“And what about the Lodge?”

“What about it?” he asked with some surprise. She didn’t respond, so he went on. “The Lodge is the most important part of my life. It’s also the topic of my MA thesis. B-but it’s not part of any ‘plan’. I don’t get anything out of it financially, if that’s what you mean.”

“That’s not exactly what I meant, but I have a proposal relating to the Lodge which might be of interest to you. It would also release you from

the need to look for extra income.”

“You mean a business proposal? The Lodge is just a Sufi brotherhood, though of a special kind, and I’m just one of its disciples. It’s been hardly 24 hours since I was appointed as a mentor over the other disciples.”

“I’ll explain what I have in mind, but let me start with a little introduction which may clear up a thing or two.” He nodded encouragingly, so she continued. “No doubt you’ll have noticed me coming and going at the Lodge over the last year – attending performances, getting to know people, spending the odd hour reading or meditating here and there. Sometimes there’s one or more people with me and we have meetings with Mr Raslan who heads the administration, or maybe I should say he is the administration.”

“Y-yes, I’ve noticed.”

“You’ve probably also wondered why I keep coming around, but you’ve been too embarrassed to ask me directly even though we’ve known each other for a few months now and we’ve often talked.”

He blinked with a smile. “Correct.”

“Well, I can now dispel your curiosity. You know me as Zayna Dinari, a German-Egyptian musician with a special interest in Oriental music. So far, so unsurprising.”

“So tell me what I don’t know.”

“What you don’t know is that I have an exciting idea about the Mawsili Lodge which is light years away from the mindset of the current administration. I’ve a big dream which would turn this historic monument into a major hub for musicians all over the world. You can picture it as an international airport with lines flowing into it from east and west, pulsing out modern and progressive Oriental music all the way to the ends of the globe.”

He stared at her. A look of disbelief had crept into his face. “How exactly is all that supposed to happen? Could you maybe give me s-some more detail about this plan of yours?”

“It would take a while to go through the details. I have a comprehensive report which goes over the aims and methods of implementation. But to give you the big picture, the idea is to turn the Lodge into a global centre for Oriental pop and jazz which will include a state-of-the-art facility fitted with the most advanced production methods for manufacturing Oriental instruments to the highest standard. Controlled raw material, simple modern designs, electronic enhancements that open up a world of possibilities. You won’t be able to tell two instruments apart. We won’t just rely on the

workmen's skills or natural talents but on standardised procedures and precise specifications. We'll also have a production line devoted to electronic Oriental instruments, using digital technology that works with the latest applications for musical composition and production. Just picture it, modern instruments like these will boost the quality of records produced by the Lodge's Centre for Oriental Pop and Jazz and take it to an international level. We'll take the markets in Europe, Canada and Australia by storm! I've contacts with some of the movers and shakers in the music industry in Germany, Austria and the UK. We'll use Oriental music to make inroads into techno and digital and we'll have musical scores for Oriental instruments written directly in modern compositions . . ."

"W-whoa, hold your horses! You seem to be getting a little carried away."

"Why hold my horses? That's the problem with you people in the East, you hold off and hold on and never manage to take a single step forward."

"I mean, we should hold on so we can study the matter properly and consult Mr Zakir Raslan . . ."

"You think I haven't already put the idea to him all this time? I've spoken with him more than once, and I met with him in the company of representatives from international music agencies who joined forces trying to persuade him this was a worthwhile project with great market potential. It was like talking to the deaf."

"That surprises me. He never brought it up in our conversations."

"In reality it's not that surprising. Mr Raslan only looks for a second opinion in his own mind, that's if he feels the urge to look for a second opinion at all."

"If you wouldn't mind, Zayna, I'd like to ask where I come into this."

"Shall we order a coffee first so we can get our minds into gear? What would you like?"

"I'll have a Turkish coffee."

"They don't serve Turkish coffee here. Coffee here means espresso and its derivatives."

"No Turkish coffee! What do all these poor dervishes drink? I leave the choice to you."

"A double espresso and you'll forget you ever wanted anything else. Waleed!" Zayna waved the skinny waiter over and he took down the orders.

Youssef recovered his drift: "I was saying that what's important to me is to keep the spirit of the place intact. The Lodge isn't just some 'business project' we can discuss using detached cost-benefit calculations. The Lodge

is an Islamic ‘monument’ where people have prayed and worshipped for centuries, using music for a higher purpose. I-I mean, music is not an end in itself.”

“Youssef – please. Don’t try to be a carbon copy of your teacher. He represents a type that’s long passed its expiry date. You’re a musician – a gifted musician, I might say, with an imagination wide enough to take in the entire world. He’s an old man trapped inside a musty old jellaba that’s been handed down the generations since time immemorial. There were two reasons I decided to speak to you of all people. One is that you have a passion for art and you always treat music as a priority. You’re well aware that Oriental music is in its death throes even though it’s the richest form of music humanity has known. Why, because people have antiquated mentalities and want to keep it locked up in the underground vaults of time. I don’t believe you share that mentality.”

“What about the second reason?” he asked.

She paused for a moment while the waiter set down their drinks. A faint smile played on her bright face as she flicked the tip of her delicate cigarette. Then she said: “I’ll be honest –because I like you.”

Youssef tried to camouflage his feeling of awkwardness under a sarcastic smile. “N-no need for flattery,” he said quickly. “I don’t have the power to give the green light to your dreamy plan.”

“Believe me,” she retorted dryly: “No-one has the power to give red or green, the juggernaut of civilisation won’t stop at boarded-up stations. It will crush anything in its path that tries to resist the march of time.”

He rotated his cup inside its saucer: “You don’t understand Zakir Raslan. There’s a lot of injustice in what you say about him.”

“Time will prove to you that there’s no-one who understands him better,” she replied quietly.

His mind drifted as he struggled to find a response. Finally he said: “Would you like me to speak to him about this?”

“I’ve already spoken with him several times, as I told you, and I’ve practically given up on him. What I want now is to convince you, so you can share my dream and my faith in this project – instead of putting your faith in old wives’ tales about al-Mawsili.”

A slight frown appeared on Youssef’s face: “I’m sorry, Zayna. My faith in the brotherhood isn’t up for negotiation. Your project might prove to be a quantum leap for the Lodge and I’d be delighted if that happened, but on one condition: that it do no damage to its spiritual core.”

She smiled back at him steadily. “Spiritual. What on earth are you talking

about? Are you referring to the soul, of all things? Huh. A spooky thingamajig you can't smell or see and you want to make it the ultimate court of appeal for everything. And when it breaks down, what do we do then? We're unable to put things right and we cast about for any old trick and swaddle it up in a conviction of the last resort."

"I-it's not a trick – it's a fundamental human truth."

"Sorry. People needed these notions in the dark ages so as to be able to cope with the obscurity of life. Superstition was an important part of their culture and those in power used it to keep people in control. All of that makes sense. What makes no sense is that the East should still be clinging to its superstitions all the way to the present day."

"Are you implying that Sheikh al-Mawsili is also one of those superstitions?"

"Why not? Just stop for a moment and think about all the improbable tales they keep dishing out about him. Doesn't it make you want to rethink the question of his existence?"

Youssef hung his head and stared into his empty coffee cup. Then he



spoke again: “Zayna, let’s agree to disagree – a-and let’s work together to do what’s best for the Lodge.”

“Wonderful. Let’s pool our energies to help bring about a quantum leap. Questions about the value of the ‘spiritual core’ and whether or not it makes sense, I’ll leave to you.”

A short while later, Youssef was taking his leave, with a sense of disquiet in tow that would stay with him for some time. It was the first time in his life he’d heard anyone speak so negatively about his teacher, and it had never once crossed his mind anyone could doubt whether the Sheikh had even existed. Nobody had also ever made him think about the Lodge in such brutal practical terms: a stone building comprised of so many physical spaces that could be put to profitable use, its assets capable of being converted into so many digital platforms. For him, it had always been a place of worship, a launching pad to the heavens. Just as his teacher had always been a source of guidance and inspiration. From that moment on, his picture was shaken and the colour drained from it.

★

Those who are privy to the hearts of things will tell you what happened to the stripling ‘Ubada after his feet brought him to Egypt. They’ll tell you how he took shelter in the Sesame Trading Lodge where foreigners and traders flock to from all over the land, and how he was hounded and mocked for sharing his roof, a mere adolescent, with traders and their households. He would be forced at the time to steal away and seek the company of four-footed beasts in a stable adjacent to the Lodge, calling down imprecations on the heads of those who had scorned and humiliated him. He would make them the subject of a quatrain like those bringing fame to Persia and Iraq at the time, and the verses would make a nest in people’s minds. Wretched mendicants at the Lodge would hurl them back at merchants or money-changers or princes who had doled out abuse to them.

Now the year of the famine is sweeping through the land, more implacable than the Mongols in their passage. Sesame seed becomes an unaffordable luxury, and the Trading Lodge, once bursting with life, falls to waste. Then the Sultan orders its founder to be strung up from its massive front gate and its iron bolt is hammered into his ankle. An evil portent overshadows those who dwell in it. But the wretched souls who cluster around master lute-maker ‘Ubada will count these events among the marvels per-

formed by the god-fearing youth, and they will spread his spirit-filled poetry up and down the districts of Darb al-Ahmar and Jamaliyya. They'll say he's a saint, turning a deaf ear to his protests, and they'll share his quarters at the woe-struck Lodge and name it after him.

★

One day, as the moon took over the night shift, the Lodge was empty as usual from students and devotees. More unusually, the lamps fixed to the ground in the courtyard were shining brightly, Zakir Raslan having switched them on on his way out to evening prayer. After prayers were over, he headed back to the Lodge. This time he was not alone. He had in his company a structural engineer who always prayed at the Endowments Mosque. They made their way through streets crouching in the shadow of clothes lines and tattered billboards. The air was heavy from the whirr of dusty old air-conditioners. Heaps of rubbish bulged at every corner, making one gag for air. They walked past rows of houses squashed together, their façades carved by time and neglect. Like decrepit old women they huddled together as if waiting for death.

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The engineer gasped in amazement as he stepped into the Lodge. It was beyond his imagination that such beauty could spring forth at the end of that dark and dreary course. He was bewitched by the sight of the open courtyard, crowned with a sheet of the purest blue sky. Wasn't this the same sky that hung over the dreary streets outside . . .? The question engrossed his thoughts for a moment before he finally turned to the old man to express his admiration. The latter gave him time to take in his surroundings in all their detail.

“What an architectural jewel, Master Zakir – one of its kind!”

“God keep you. As an engineer you've got what it takes to appreciate its special character.”

“You don't need to be an expert to appreciate it. There's a strange magic about it.”

“That's the spirit of the place. Every place develops its own spirit, depending on the kind of experiences it's exposed to. These walls have never looked on a quarrel, over hundreds of years they've never heard anyone raise his voice. Not a drop of blood has been spilled over this ground and not one person with an evil heart has crossed the threshold. Even mosques are defiled by people who coming thieving for shoes. This place is different – God has given it special protection.”

“Glory be to God, Master. I’m honestly amazed at the sense of peace one feels the moment one walks through the doorway, even while the racket carries on outside.”

“This little spot has a direct line to heaven that’s always open, so its walls don’t strain to listen to the noises made by humankind. That’s why I ask everyone who graces us with his presence to switch off his mobile, or at least put it on silent.”

“Would you like me to do the same?”

“That would be a great kindness on your part.”

The engineer quickly complied. Zakir offered to show him around the Lodge, and led the way. The devotees practising their rituals had left their mark in every corner, and he felt their tranquility wafting over to him. He was dazzled by the workshop, with its distinctive perfume and the different instruments lying around, some still in parts, others all polished and complete. He was delighted by the detailed commentary Zakir provided at every chamber they entered and every storeroom in the building. But what left him spellbound was the chamber where Sheikh al-Mawsili had his resting place. This was the room in which his precious remains were preserved: his caftan, his cotton belt, his inkwell and some of his implements, including the quills made out of eagle feather. But also, most importantly, here were the various bits of paper he had left behind. The passage of time had left them stained and their dark edges had frayed, and some of the obscure symbols traced out on them had faded away. These pieces of paper were preserved inside a glass chest that was lit up from the interior.

“What’s all this paper?” the engineer asked in some surprise.

“They’re the Sheikh’s effects – musical scores he pioneered.”

“Did they use musical notation in his time?”

“Our Sheikh was inspired by God. He realised how important his music was, and he tried to write it down so it could inspire later generations and ease the way for people searching for God.”

“He was a genius!”

“Very few people have ever seen what’s in this room. But there’s something else I’d like to show you.”

“Another one of the Sheikh’s effects?”

“Alas, no – it’s the problem I mentioned to you.”

“Of course. Will we have enough light?”

“We have a powerful searchlight which will do the job, don’t worry.”

They went out through the rear gate and circled to the southern façade of the Lodge. The sounds of the outside world drifted into their hearing –

cars honking, dogs barking, the lone wailing of a woman. The engineer groped his way along in the darkness behind Zakir, aided by a spray of silver light the moon was casting over the uneven ground. In a few moments, Zakir switched on a roving searchlight and trained its beam on a distant corner of the southern façade. It brought to view a crack wide enough to put your fist through, zigzagging upwards all across from the base of the wall like a creeping plant. The engineer gazed at it in evident dismay. His face grew rigid as he stuck his fingers into the crack feeling for its depth.

“Is there any sign of the crack on the other side?”

“What other side?”

“I mean on the interior of the wall.”

“I haven’t noticed anything.”

“Let’s make sure – the crack looks deep.”

As Zakir bent down to retrieve the searchlight, he felt a stab of pain tear through the disc in his lower back like a searing rod. His face convulsed and he bent over double in the vice grip of pain. The engineer noticed and rushed over to support him, propping him up by the armpits.

“Why must you bend down like that, my dear man!” he implored. “Let me carry things for you.”

“Don’t give it another thought. For a moment I forgot my doctor’s advice that I must bend my knees every time I want to pick something up, even if it’s not especially heavy. The body is weak, my good friend. We travel through life with defects and sufferings stacked high on our shoulders.”

The engineer raised the searchlight and followed the old man as he tottered unsteadily through the gate. From the inside, the surface of the wall seemed intact. The engineer ran his hands over it and tapped on it using a smooth stone he’d picked up outside. Shortly, he held up the searchlight and began to go over the wall bit by bit in its luminance. Every so often he’d knock on different points of the wall with the stone. He then began to point out a number of delicate cracks snaking across the wall, which seemed to be a continuation of the fissure on the outside.

“Why don’t you notify the antiquities inspectors about this problem?”

“Please – spare me from that pack of crooks. What do they know about fixing what’s broken? No-one needs fixing more badly than they do.”

“But they’re the experts, my dear man. This building isn’t made of concrete, the kind a civil engineer like myself knows how to handle. It’s made out of stone and it needs special materials to be repaired.”

“We’re not talking about repairs yet. All I want from you is an assessment of the gravity of the situation.”

“It seems grave indeed. The fissure is wide and deep, and it might deteriorate very rapidly. These historic buildings rely on their stone walls to carry the weight, and the blocks of stone are hefty in themselves even if there’s no additional weight pulling on the structure.”

“Wouldn’t it be possible for you to take on the management of the repairs? Money is no issue. And we can ask for help from foreign experts if you like. My main concern is to keep a safe distance from archaeological authorities and their inspectorates.”

The engineer set the searchlight on the ground and said gently: “Please don’t ask me to take on this responsibility, Master Zakir. We’re in real need of an expert, and it would be wrong to take shortcuts and try handling a fissure of this magnitude in a less than professional manner.”

Zakir smiled with composure. “You’re right,” he said in tones of conviction. “Leave it with me and I’ll handle it in the best way possible. The Ministry of Antiquities doesn’t have a monopoly on the experts after all.”

“I wish you every success. Please keep me informed on how things develop, and maybe I can lend a helping hand one way or another.”

“You’ve already been a help, my good friend,” Zakir said as he switched off the searchlight and began leading the engineer away. “I’m truly grateful you stopped by, and I’ll update you on developments as they arise.”

At the northern gate, Zakir slid the brass bolt across the door and shook his visitor’s hand. He thanked the engineer again and they said their good-byes. Then he went around the courtyard switching off the lamps. The stone columns were plunged into darkness once again. Bathed in the silver of the moonlight, they surrendered to a peaceful slumber for a few hours until daybreak.

# *An Artist's Journey*

## *by Mizouni Bannani*



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Mizouni Bannani is Professor of Education Sciences at the Higher Institute for Applied Studies in Humanities in Sbeitla, Tunisia. Bannani won the Regional Cre-

ativity Prize for Children's Literature in Kasserine in 1999. In addition to the winning work excerpted here, *Rehlat Fannan* (An Artist's Journey), he has published a group of literary works for children and teens, including *Sorah Laysat Kalswar* (A Picture Like No Other), *Turab Al Watan* (The soil of the homeland), and others. He has also published two collections of short stories, *Humma Al Ardh* (The Fever of the Earth, 1989), and *Mawawil Aedmen Dhefat Al Nar* (Mawawil of the One who Returned from the Shore of Fire, 1996), and a novel *Doroob Al Hawan* (Paths of Humiliation). He is a literary and artistic consultant at Al Moanasah Publishing House, and has participated in establishing the branch of the Union of Tunisian Writers in Kasserine in 1997, being its chair until 2017.

### *About The Book*

*An Artist's Journey* is a novel that relies on the elegance and aesthetics of expression to connect with the young audience. The book is rich in imagery and metaphorical expression, proceeds slowly but excitingly, and is infused with imagination. The use of language is similarly inspired. In the book, birds can speak as they fly across and through the world, taking readers on a journey with wings of imagination; they are no longer just readers, but participants too. The novel emphasizes values of loyalty and belonging to one's homeland.

Published by Dar Al Mua'nassa Publishing, 2020. ISBN: 9789973985002.

144 pages. Original Title: *Rehlat Fannan*

# Two chapters from *An Artist's Journey*

## Chapter 3

### The Resort Far Away

ONE DAY Zahi the goldfinch woke up a little before sunrise, with a sense that the time had come to carry out his decision to move to the tourist resort.

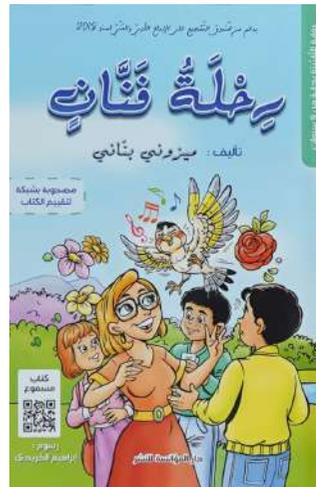
He slipped warily out of bed without alerting his mate, who was sitting on her eggs, and started out flying over the woods.

He cast a farewell glance at the trees and the big clearing, then shot off into the air, his little heart longing for the tourist resort that had fascinated him for some time. Thoughts of the resort had impaired his common sense and his willpower, making him forget his thinness and his mysterious ailment. His wings beat the air bravely and he battled fatigue throughout the long journey.

His dreams gave his wings unusual strength, making the ordeal easier to endure, and after a long journey he found himself flying over the walls of the resort, where he landed on a branch of the first pine tree he came across, his heart full of gladness and joy.

Zahi hardly had his breath back after his journey when another bird landed near him with feathers in colours quite unlike the colours of any species of bird that he had ever seen in his life. The bird welcomed him to the resort with friendly gestures and warm words, sometimes chirping and sometimes whistling.

The goldfinch was puzzled at first but soon, judging by the bird's size and shape, he was able to identify him as a swallow, but a swallow that had



had his feathers dyed the colours of the rainbow.

The goldfinch remembered that male swallows had dark blue backs, bellies that were reddish brown, and chests with a black collar, and that their beaks and feet were black.

Zahi was silent for a while as he tried to think of reasons why the swallow had done this to his feathers, but he couldn't think of any good explanation. He felt sorry for the swallow and took a vow to preserve his own integrity and not to disguise it under any circumstances or for any reason.

He also remembered that swallows in general are swift fliers, have sharp eyesight and catch insects that hover in the air. He watched this swallow's behaviour and was puzzled again when he saw that he took no notice of a swarm of insects flying around its head. Once the two birds had introduced themselves, the swallow told the goldfinch about the lavish lifestyle he was going to enjoy among the birds that lived in the fancy hotels and the lush gardens in the resort and how, after a while, the luxury would leave its mark on his body and his face.

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The swallow could see how puzzled and perplexed Zahi was, so he started telling him how most of the birds in the resort had made changes to their appearance, habits and behaviour, under the influence of the way the tourists lived.

Explaining why he himself had changed his colour and appearance, and hiding his embarrassment, he said, "A distinctive appearance helps you stand out and makes it easier to be accepted by the people who live in the resort. It opens doors that would otherwise be locked, secret windows and special passageways. It leads you to fame and wealth."

"If you saw the singers in the world of humans, what they wear for each song, the hairstyles they have, and how they change their facial features with cosmetic surgery, you'd think that what I have done is normal. Show business has its own methods, its own tricks and traditions."

After a considerable silence while he sought the right words for what he wanted to say, the swallow added: "Don't ask me why I no longer feed on the insects flying around my head, but they no longer seem appetizing. Fine food has changed my tastes. It's led me to avoid these insects, but I do sometimes need to clear my throat of the fats and oils that I eat, so then I attack the swarms of insects and catch some easily digestible ones."

The swallow paused. The passing of a large white cat nearby made Zahi



cover and freeze in terror. The swallow reassured his new friend, telling him that the cats in the resort were no longer interested in rats and birds because they were given so much to eat every day.

But he did make sure to warn the goldfinch of the dangers of trusting the cats, because they sometimes needed, as he put it, to kill a bird or a mouse to remind the others that cats must always remain feared.

Zahi began to understand what a high price the birds that lived in the resort had paid in return for enjoying its bounties and comforts.

He could see that were enormous difficulties awaited him in

growing accustomed to this new way of life, but that did not diminish his resolve to plunge into the experience of living in this earthly paradise. He had made a long and dangerous flight in order to reach it, but he hadn't forgotten the promise he had made to himself earlier – that he would preserve intact his original appearance.

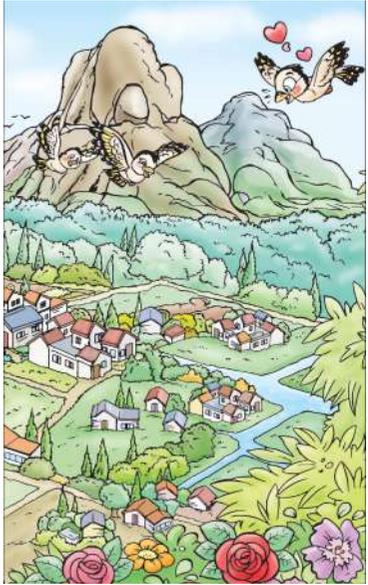
As he bowed his head in thought, the swallow began to wonder slyly, "So how long will this goldfinch really be able to leave his feathers in their natural colours?"

Chapter 4

A Reconnaissance Trip

Zahi the goldfinch began to trust the swallow. He didn't stay long on the edge of the tourist resort. He readily accepted when the swallow invited him to explore and discover the new world in which he would live the springtime of his life.

The swallow took his new friend around the gardens, the artificial lakes, the polo fields, the bowling greens and tennis courts and accompanied him to the swimming pool and the spa wing. He finally led him to the shopping mall and the venues for singing, amusement and relaxation.



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When they were hungry and tired, his friend took him to the banqueting tables where fatty foods and refreshments were laid out, and they set about pecking at delicious crumbs until their craws were full and they began to feel sick.

The two birds were so tired and full of food that they threw themselves down on the first wooden seat they came across under one of the bushes.

Zahi didn't notice that night had fallen because the searchlights and the lamps set up everywhere prevented the black drapes of night from descending on the place. The passageways and open spaces were pulsating with activity, full of humans and joy and happiness all the time, so he could hardly believe his friend the swallow when he told him that it was already past midnight.

The swallow took Zahi to a nest attached to a ceiling so that he could spend some nights there while waiting till he could have his own dwelling.

The nest was lined with silk, snug and soft to the touch. He settled into it without forgetting that this was the first time in his life he had spent the night in a bed other than his own, in a nest that he had not made with himself, or in a place far from his mate and his daughters and sons. He lay there a while remembering his earlier life, until he succumbed to drowsiness.

In his deep sleep he dreamed he was singing to an audience, dressed in the most splendid outfit. The people, the stones, the birds, the trees and the moon all acclaimed and revered him. They gave him the seat of honour, made a massive and sumptuous banquet for him and awarded him rare treasures and priceless curiosities. He could see his mate watching him from afar, displeased with his new elevated status.

Zahi's days and months passed cheerfully and pleasantly in the resort, where everything was relaxed and beautiful. He gradually became so engrossed in the life of luxury and pleasure that he forgot his mate and the mother of his children. He forgot her eggs and the vow he had taken. He forgot the songs about toil and labour. His old world faded away and he gradually abandoned his old practice of sleeping and rising early. Eventually his days merged with his nights, and his nights with his days. His crawl started to swell and his body filled out with flesh and fat. He started to put on weight and his gait changed. His movements became ponderous and he started flying low while imagining he was still flying high. He began to lose his sense of caution. All this happened without him noticing and he had no one to alert him to the way he had changed.

And if you were to ask me, my grandsons and granddaughters and gentle listeners, whether the goldfinch still dreamed those dreams of being a singer, I would reply, "Yes."

And I would add that in those dream his mate had started checking his feathers, feather by feather, as if she was worried they might have been dyed. One day Zahi stopped in front of one of the large cages in the middle of the square for coloured birds, close to the reception hall.

Inside the green cage there was a pampered African parrot with feathers of amazing colours. It imitated human voices and the sounds of animals and car engines. When it noticed the goldfinch, it turned towards him and started to sing like a goldfinch, showing off its extraordinary vocal skills.

The goldfinch could not conceal his admiration for the parrot's voice and its skills at mimickry, but his admiration soon turned into envy when his colourful swallow friend told him how interested the tourists were in this parrot and how the visitors and guests gathered around it every day to listen to it and take souvenir pictures of it.

The goldfinch saw for himself how well the keeper treated the parrot and how he rewarded it with fruit, seeds or nuts whenever it sang or spoke in an innovative manner.

He often heard the keeper praise the parrot with encouraging expressions such as, "You're a clever parrot," "Well done, Polly!" or "I love you."

As soon as the parrot heard such praise, it danced inventive dances on its perch, delighted that the keeper had praised it and was pleased with it.

The goldfinch saw that as time passed more and more people gathered around the cage and that they acclaimed, admired, applauded and esteemed the parrot. He started to envy it and thought of usurping the parrot's place.

Within a month later the parrot had become a star. Newspapers, magazines and television stations showed pictures of him and news of him circulated in detail in the regions and overseas. The parrot's fame and renown began to make Zahi feel uneasy, blighting his new life. He started trying to think of a way to attract the attention of the humans and the other birds. He looked for a trick to steal the limelight from that pampered parrot. Then a crazy idea occurred to him. After a short time, his friend the painted swallow helped him turn his idea into a lived reality.

Imagine, listeners, what trick Zahi came up with to achieve his objective. You don't need to use your imaginations too strenuously: here they are, Zahi and his swallow friend, off to the hairdresser's and the beautician's salon. Out he comes a short while later, looking different and with a new name, Zahwan, flying low and landing close to the African parrot's cage.

He remembered the hairdresser's words when they said goodbye at the salon door: "Always remember, Zahwan, that a distinctive appearance, body language and the quality of the music are the most important things when it comes to catching the attention of humans when singing for visitors to the tourist resort. The look is half the song. Never forget that."

Some of the visitors noticed that Zahwan was nearby. They looked at him and thought that he was indeed a bird with eye-catching colours. None of them realised that the colours were artificial, arranged by the fingertips of a hairdresser skilled at dyeing.

When Zahwan, the bird formerly known as Zahi, realised that everyone was looking at him, he landed on the basin of a fountain and started to sing the sweetest of tunes:

Fly, fly in the open  
Dance, dance to the light,  
Trill, trill in the wilds  
Sing, sing for life

Every now and then he would stop singing to perform some elaborate contemporary dances that delighted the audience, then went back to singing and warbling. His beak wide open, his tongue trembled in rapture as he sang:

This world is a picture fashioned  
With paints, drawn with a feather.  
Colour the house with a brush,  
Adorn the meadow with hope,  
Turn the clouds into vines  
And the mists into low-hanging grapes,  
Turn the moon into a silver boat  
And the trees into a magic ladder.

Whenever he remembered the hairdresser's advice, he went back to dancing, creating regular dabkas with his toes, to which the humans swayed in pleasure and rapture.

Gradually the audience started to clap till their palms stung and cheer in admiration until their throats were parched. They loved the way he looked and sang and his agile dance moves. They scattered roses around him and threw money at his feet. When the goldfinch heard the clatter of coins and the rustle of banknotes falling at his feet, he was happier than ever and he sang and danced so skilfully that the people forgot the pampered parrot that they had gathered around just a short while earlier and moved on to the new bird.

When people lost interest in it, the parrot was appalled. The loss of status in such a short time hurt his pride. Rumour had it that that in the following days he went into a state of deep silence and sadness and no one knew when he would recover.

In this way Zahwan managed to steal the limelight from the parrot, and for a long time he enjoyed the pleasure of being triumphant and achieving his objective. He held out hope for other triumphs that he thought would come in the days to come.

*Translated by Jonathan Wright*

# *The Lilac Girl*

by *Ibtisam Barakat*

Illustrated by *Sinan Hallak*

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Ibtisam Barakat is an award-winning, Palestinian-American author, poet, translator, artist and educator, based in the United States. She publishes in both English and Arabic; her memoir, *Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood* (2007), received considerable critical acclaim and has been translated into several languages. A further memoir, *Balcony on the Moon, Coming of Age in Palestine* came out in 2016. Her poems, essays and short stories have appeared in magazines including *World Literature Today*, *The Nation*, *Wasafiri* and the *Washington Post*. *The Lilac Girl* is her sixth book for younger readers.

## *About the Book*

*The Lilac Girl* is a magical realism children's tale, written as a tribute to the life and work of renowned Palestinian artist Tamam al-Akhal (1935- ). As a young Palestinian girl, the narrator tells us, Tamam has a deep sorrow in her heart that is "like the colors of twilight". This sorrow is her yearning for her childhood home in Jaffa, from which she has been separated by a disaster and seventy years of darkness". Young Tamam finds freedom in the world of art and imagination, creating beauty from pain and transforming loss in a powerful but simple story that challenges the injustice of being forced to leave one's home and not allowed to see it again. With 32 illustrations by Sinan Hallak.

Published by Tamer Institute for Community Education, Ramallah, Palestine, 2019. ISBN: 9789950270206.

*Words and illustrations from*  
***The Lilac Girl***



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Tamam Al-Akhal loves to paint  
her feelings and thoughts  
in colors that whisper or shout.

When she is happy or sad  
she paints her happiness in oils  
and her pain in watercolors.

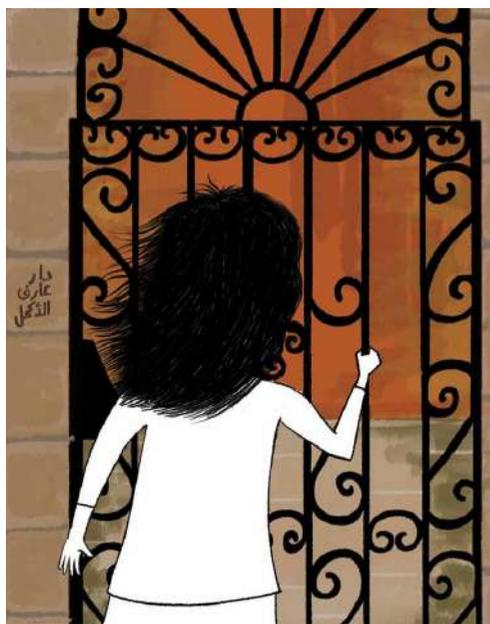


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In Tamam's heart,  
there's a sad feeling  
that is like the colors of twilight.

It is her heart's dusk and dawn,  
And her longing to go to Yafa  
again  
and see her childhood home  
where she first learned drawing  
and played with colors and lines.

But Yafa is far from Tamam.  
It is a Nakba, a Naksa and  
seventy years of darkness away.  
One evening Tamam painted  
her old home in her imagination,  
and went to visit it.





When she knocked on the door,  
the windows shook,  
and the house trembled.  
The walls told the ceiling,  
the kitchen told the bedroom,  
and the front door told the garden:  
“After her many years of absence,  
Tamam is home!”

A girl opened the door.  
Tamam said the house was  
her old home  
where she had left her  
many childhood memories.  
The girl refused to let Tamam come in

and quickly closed the door in her face.

A green tear fell from Tamam's eye,  
then an orange tear,  
then a blue one.

Tears of every watercolor  
fell from Tamam's eyes.  
Tamam took a stone from the garden  
of her childhood home.

Because she could not take  
the foundation stone  
she named it  
“the sadness stone”.



She sat in the garden  
and like she did when she was a child  
she began painting.

Now she was painting her old house  
on a piece of paper to take back with her

While she was crying and painting  
with her colorful tears,  
the colors of the old house began  
to escape  
and to follow Tamam like a breeze  
swirling with autumn leaves,

until the old house became  
the color of leafless trees.

The girl who lived in the house rushed out  
and shouted at the colors to come back,

but they went with Tamam  
who loves to play with them.

The only color that remained behind was  
a blend of angry red,  
sad blue,  
and devastated yellow –  
a lilac shade –

that colored the girl and the house and  
the city of Yafa all night  
from dusk to dawn.

*Translated by the author*

Winner of the Sheikh Zayed Book Award  
for Children's Literature 2019

# *I Dream of Being a Cement Mixer*

*by Hussain Almutawaa*

*Illustrated by Walid Taher*

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A Kuwaiti writer and photographer born in 1989, Almutawaa attained a bachelor's degree in Literature and Criticism from the College of Arabic Language at the University of Kuwait, minoring in Philosophy. He started his literary career as a poet in 2009, and has participated in many poetry events and festivals. In 2015, he began writing short stories and won first place in the "University Poet and Story Teller" category at the University of Kuwait. Almutawaa then moved on to novels, publishing his first, *Turab*, at the end of 2017, and his children's novel, *I Dream of Being A Cement Mixer*, in 2018.

## *About the Book*

In Hussain Almutawaa's clever and beautifully written narrative Haddam is a little demolition truck growing up in a loving family. His parents go to work every day demolishing buildings with their big wrecking balls, but soft-hearted Haddam doesn't like to destroy. He dreams of being a cement mixer. He'd rather build things up instead of breaking them down. After troubles and adventures he finds he can use his wrecking ball to smooth out cement on the ground. *I Dream of Being a Cement Mixer* is an uplifting story, beautifully written, about the power of friendship, about finding your place in the world, and about realising your dreams while remaining true to who you are.

Published by Al-Hadaek Group, 2018. ISBN: 9786144391457. 40 pages.

An excerpt from  
*I Dream of Being a  
Cement Mixer*



TUMBLEDOWN IS a little truck about as old as you.

You only needed to take one look at his face to realise what a sweet and friendly truck he was.

Tumbledown loved his family to bits, but he had never felt happy about the work they did.

And that made them feel a little upset.

His dad had often tried to get him to help out when they went to work to knock down a building.

“Listen to me, my son,” he once said to him. “Sometimes in life things stop being useful. You then have to knock them down so you can build new things in their place. If we didn’t do that, someone else

would.”

“So let someone else do it, Daddy,” Tumbledown replied.

“But then we would be out of a job. All we know to do is how to knock things down.”

“I don’t like knocking things down, I don’t,” Tumbledown mumbled to himself as he rolled off chirping and humming, his mind full of dreams. He



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dreamed of himself with a big drum on his back for mixing cement. One day he would be a cement mixer.

One day while Tumbledown was rolling down the street, he spotted two diggers and a bulldozer clearing away the rubble from a building that had just been knocked down.

He purred to a stop and said hello.

“Well, if it isn’t Tumbledown! Nice to see you, dreamer boy. We hear you want to be a cement mixer some day,” said one of the diggers.

Tumbledown replied, beaming with joy: “That is true!”

“And I want to be a paper plane, ha ha!” the digger guffawed meanly.

“Did you hear the one about the crane that became a racing car?” the bulldozer cackled.

“And did you know I always dreamt of being a fire extinguisher?” said the second digger. “When I went to apply for the job, they hosed me down – whoosh!”

By the time these words were out of the digger's mouth, all the cars and trucks standing around were laughing at Tumbledown.

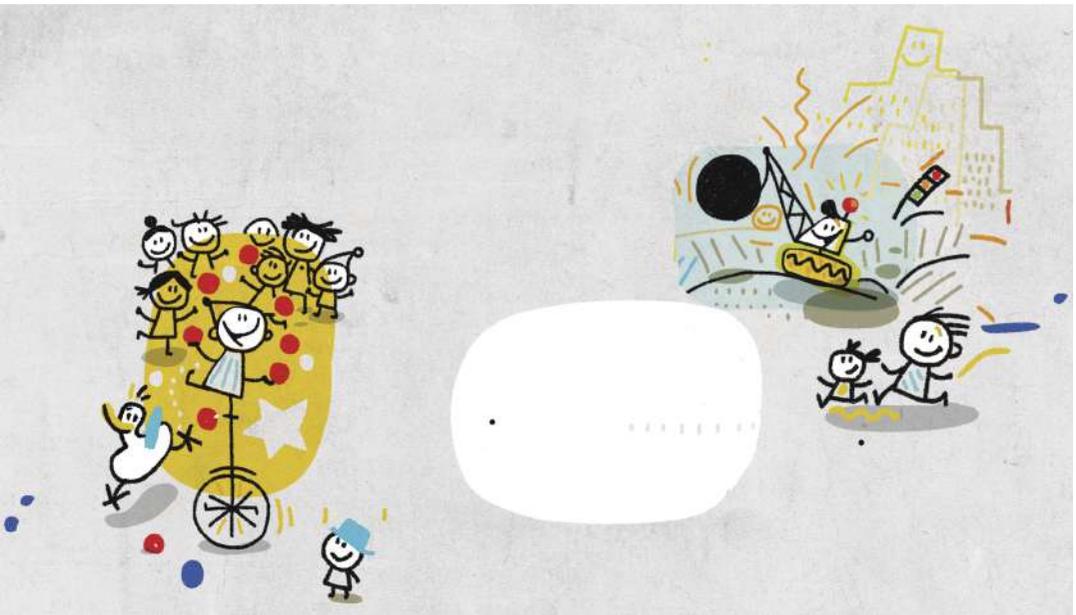
Tumbledown went red as a beetroot and hurried away as fast as his wheels could carry him. When they could no longer see him, he burst into tears.

Tumbledown cried harder than he had ever cried before and all his parts began to judder.

He didn't notice that the big wrecking ball that hung from the end of one his long arms had started swinging wildly back and forth.

He could hardly see through his tears, but when he dried his eyes and looked up, he saw two smashed-up cars in front of him. Great big cracks had appeared in the buildings all around him where his iron ball had landed.

He felt very embarrassed and quickly sputtered away.



As he was rambling along, he came across a group of children standing in a circle around a clown who was putting on a show and doing magic tricks that made everyone laugh.

He felt curious, so he stopped for a moment to watch. Soon he started to enjoy the show, and finally a smile spread over his face.

In the next trick, the clown tried to grab hold of a duck, but the duck kept slipping away from him and hiding inside one of the legs of his trousers. Everyone burst out laughing, and Tumbledown also laughed with delight. He laughed so hard he almost fell over. At that moment his big iron ball began to swing, and it would have smashed up everything around him if he hadn't managed to steady it just in time, though not before it had destroyed a traffic light and a tree.

And so the days passed . . .

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When Tumbledown felt sad and cried, he smashed everything around him to pieces.

When he felt happy and laughed, he smashed everything around him to pieces.

When he felt calm he was filled with regret about all the things he had smashed to pieces while he was sad or happy.

At school, things were not any better.

A number of pupils made fun of him and laughed at his big dream. Finally he couldn't take it anymore. He slammed his iron ball into the ground and stomped angrily out of the front gate, swearing to himself he would never ever go back.

He rushed to the library and began reading every book he could find about how to mix cement.

Then he went to where the mechanics and the ironsmiths worked and he started asking them questions. He got different replies from



different people. Some said: “That’s impossible.” Others said: “It’s possible but hard.” And yet others said: “It’s all quite simple, actually.”

Tumbledown spent several days zooming between the library and the workshops with great enthusiasm. But after all those days, he was still at the same place as he had started.

Finally, his dad called him for a heart-to-heart. “My dear son,” he said to him gently, “the reason we have the special shape and powers we have is that we were made to knock things down. That’s our nature and nobody can change it, not you and not I. All we can do is accept it and try to live with it.”

Tumbledown decided it was time to give in. He finished his studies and then set to work knocking down buildings.

*Translated by Sophia Vasalou*

Winner of the Sheikh Zayed Book Award  
for Children's Literature 2018

# *The Dinoraffe*

by *Hessa Al Muhairi*  
Illustrated by *Sura Ghazwan*

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Hessa Al Muhairi holds a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education and two master's degrees from Deakin University in Australia, one in Science in Education Management and the other in Policy. She has been working as a nursery teacher since her graduation. Al Muhairi has participated in numerous children's literature workshops and managed a number of training programmes. She has two published books for children, *Whose Footprints are These?* and *The Dinoraffe*.

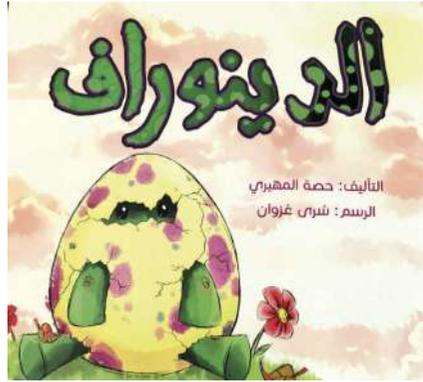
## *About the Book*

An egg has hatched, and what comes out of it? A chicken? No. A turtle? No, it's a dinosaur. But where is his family? The little dinosaur sets off to look for his family, searching the animal kingdom for someone who looks like him. He meets plenty of different animals, but none like him . . . until he meets the giraffe and the giraffe family. This picture book explores identity and difference, belonging, and acceptance, in carefully crafted and accessible language.

Publisher: Al Hudhud Publishing and Distribution, (UAE), 2017.  
ISBN: 9789948232728. 32 Pages. Original Title: *Al-dinoraf*.

## *The Dinoraffe*

IT WAS a gusty spring night, and a big egg lay perched on top of a hill. A strong wind blew up, and before long, the egg was rolling at great speed toward the bottom of the hill. It rolled and it rolled until finally it came to a fence that surrounded a farm. Then it kept on rolling until at last it stopped next to a chicken's nest.



As the sun's golden rays appeared, and as the rooster crowed to greet the new day, the big egg hatched, and out popped the head of a little green creature.

It was a dinosaur!



The dinosaur looked around and saw the hen sitting on her eggs. Laying his head next to her warm feathers, he smiled and said: “Mama!”

Surprised, the hen looked down at the green creature next to her and said: “I’m not your mama!”

“Look at my body,” the hen went on. “It’s covered with feathers. I have wings and a beak. And I only have two legs, but you have four!”

The dinosaur looked at the hen, his little eyes filled with confusion. He stretched back his long neck and searched his body for feathers, but he didn’t find any. He didn’t find wings or a beak, either. Then he looked at his legs, and sure enough, he had four!

“So, then,” the little dinosaur exclaimed, “where is my mama?”



The hen said: “Well, there’s a turtle who lives not far from here. Ask her. Maybe she’ll know the answer, since she lays eggs, too.”

So the dinosaur left the farm to look for his mother, even though he didn’t know what she looked like, or what colour she was. He kept walking until he came to a grassy place with rocks scattered here and there.

He passed a puddle and took a drink, and as he looked at his reflection on the water’s surface, he paused for a moment and said sadly: “I wonder if I look like my mama?”

After searching for some time, he found the turtle. She had just

laid her eggs, and was covering them with earth to protect them until it was time for them to hatch. The dinosaur thought to himself: I think the turtle must be my mama! Her face seems to look like mine, and she has legs like mine too!

The dinosaur went up to the turtle, crying out: “You’re my mama!”

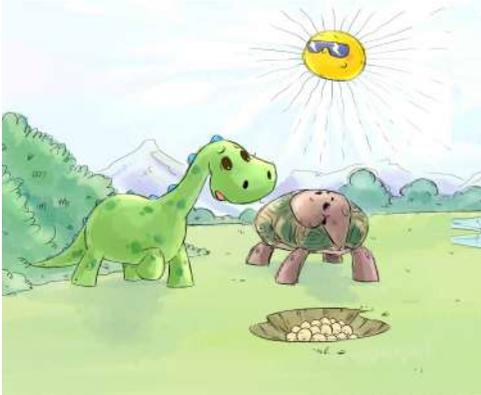
Turning ever so slowly to look at the dinosaur, the turtle said: “Who? Me?”

The dinosaur replied: “Yes. I came out of an egg. And you have eggs too!”

The turtle replied: “That might be so, my little one. But you don’t have a hard shell the way we do. And your neck is long. Besides, my eggs are small, and you are big.”

The dinosaur craned his long neck backward to see whether he had a shell or not, and he didn’t find one. He remembered the big egg he had come out of. He remembered it was a different colour. Sadness appeared in his eyes, and he hung his head, murmuring: “Where is my mama, then? Why did she leave me all alone?”

The turtle felt sorry for the poor little dinosaur and said: “There’s



an alligator who lives near here. Ask him. He might know the answer, since his skin is rough like yours.”

The little dinosaur felt happy and he went running to look for the alligator, imagining what he would look like and what colour he would be. He walked and walked for a long way until the sun was about to set. When the dinosaur reached the riverbank, he found the



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alligator lying there with his eyes closed. When the dinosaur saw that the alligator was green in colour and his skin was rough, he smiled. He felt sure he had found home.

The dinosaur went up quietly beside the alligator. The alligator noticed the dinosaur and said: “Who are you?”

“Aren’t you my mama?” asked the dinosaur, feeling happy.

The alligator replied: “Well, if you can dive under water like me, then you belong to my family.”

The dinosaur thought for a while and then rushed to the river and jumped in. To his surprise he found he could not swim. He splashed and sputtered and almost drowned!

The alligator rushed to save the dinosaur, nudging him out of the river with his long snout. The dinosaur went on coughing until he brought up all the water he had swallowed.

Then he said: “I can’t dive like you. I am not an alligator. So who is my mama?”

The alligator replied: “I don’t know. Anyway, pardon me, but I have

to leave you now. The sun will go down soon.”

The dinosaur watched the alligator swim away down the river. Then he started walking again to dry himself off.

Night fell, covering everything with its black robe.

The little dinosaur was tired and hungry.

He decided to eat some leaves off a tree.

The little dinosaur ate a little, and then he wrapped a big leaf round himself to keep warm in the cold night.

He felt so, so lonely!

He gazed up at the moon, thinking about his family, until his eyes fell shut, a tear trickling down his little cheeks. Then he fell fast asleep!

The little dinosaur dreamed he was playing with friends who looked like him.



The next morning the dinosaur woke up and felt sad. He realized his happiness had been just a dream. So he continued his journey, not knowing where he was going.

As he wandered about, he saw a tail peeking out of the grass.

He touched the tail with trembling hands, and a kangaroo stuck its head out in surprise.

“Who are you?” asked the kangaroo.

The dinosaur said: “I’m looking for my family, and I think I’ve found them. See? Our tails look alike!”



The kangaroo laughed and said: “But do you have a pouch like mine to carry your children in?”

The dinosaur looked curiously at the baby kangaroo in his mother’s pouch. Then he looked down at his tummy to see if he had a pouch too.

But he didn’t!

So on the little dinosaur went, sadder than ever.

He kept thinking: Where could my mother be? And my family, where could they be?

While the dinosaur was walking along, deep in thought, a coconut came rolling towards him.

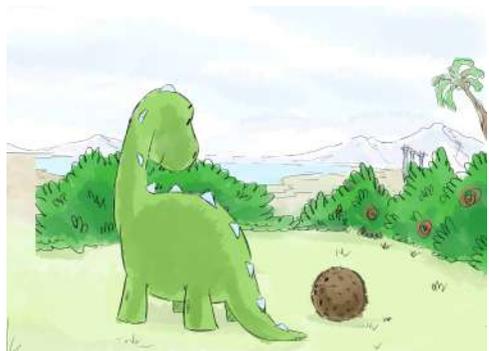
He looked to see where the coconut had come from and found some animals chasing after it.

The dinosaur smiled broadly when he noticed their long necks. Their necks looked like his!

He said to himself happily: I think this is my family!

He joined in their game, his heart jumping for joy.

The mother giraffe watched them from a short distance away. She came up and asked tenderly: “And who is this new



little friend?”

The dinosaur replied bashfully: “I came out of an egg like a chicken. I eat grass like a turtle. I have green skin like an alligator. I have a tail like a kangaroo’s. And I have a neck that’s long like yours. I’ve looked all over for my family, but I haven’t found them.”

“I don’t even know my name or who I am!”

The mother giraffe approached the dinosaur, and said to him very gently: “You, my little one, are a dinosaur. But don’t worry. We are happy for you to join us. So, welcome to the giraffe family. From now on we’ll call you Dinoraffe!”



# Hatless

by Lateefa Buti

Illustrated by Duha al-Khatib

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Lateefa Buti is a Kuwaiti author specialized in children's literature. Her portfolio extends from stand-alone novels, theatrical works, articles in magazines and periodicals, to works on radio and television. She has several independently published works including *The Mermaid* and *My Country and Ininkayo*, in addition to dramas such as *Juha's Gate* and *Salma the Princess of the Sea*. Buti is also a regular contributor to the well-known magazine *Al Arabi Al Sagheer* and worked on a number of radio-based programs and series targeting adolescents.

## About the Book

The main character is a young girl named Hatless who lives in the City of Hats, where all people are born wearing hats covering their heads and faces. Their world is dark, silent, and odourless and Hatless feels trapped inside her hat. She wants to take it off but is afraid until she realizes that the frightening things will still be there whether she takes it off or not. So she takes her hat off and rejoices in a new world and beautiful surroundings, but is shunned by everybody. Undeterred, she finds a way of getting everybody to take off their hats and embrace the world, improving her own life and those of her fellow citizens. A beautifully written and illustrated story that encourages independent thinking, innovation and creativity.

Published by Seedan Media, January 2015. ISBN 9789996653186. 19 pages.

# Hatless

IN THE City of Hats, people were born with hats that covered their heads and their faces – hats of all different shapes, colours and sizes.

One day a little girl was born in the City of Hats. Just like everybody else, she was born with a hat that covered her head and her face.

When the little girl with the hat got a little older, she asked herself: “What is there outside the hat?”

“Is it dark out there the way it is inside the hat?

“Are there sounds out there for me to hear? Or is it silent out there, the way it is under my hat? Are there smells other than the smell of the hat that I breathe in every day?”

She said to herself: “If there isn’t anything, then there must be a big hat that covers everything. I’m going to lift my hat up a little bit to see . . .”



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She thought: “There might be something scary outside the hat! But if there is, it will be there even if the hat is on my head!”

“And then again, maybe there isn’t anything! I’ll give it a try.”

Ever so slowly, the little girl lifted up her hat. She smelled the roses and the grass. She smelled the wet earth.

When she lifted her hat a little bit more, she saw a bright moon. Around it she saw stars twinkling and dancing in the sky. “Wowwww!” she whispered.

She took the hat off completely.

She heard trees rustling in the breeze.

She heard birds stirring in their nests.

When the morning sun came up, the hatless girl cried: “What a beautiful, colourful world!”

“What a beautiful world!!”

When everyone saw her without a hat, they cried: “You’re different from us now! You have to leave the City of Hats!”

Hatless felt sad because the people didn’t know there was a beautiful world outside their hats. So she asked them to let her stay because she was going to make herself a new hat. They thought for a bit. Then they said: “We agree!”

So Hatless wove herself a new hat. It was a hat which let her see





the light of the moon and the sun. It let her hear the murmur of the water and the singing of the birds. It let her smell the roses and other flowers.

After she had finished making her hat, Hatless invited people to try it on.

So they did. One by one, they put the new hat on under their own hats. They wanted to make sure the new hat was sturdy enough. Then they took off their own hats.

And when they took off their own hats they saw a bright, magical world.

“What a hat!” they whispered. “What a hat!”

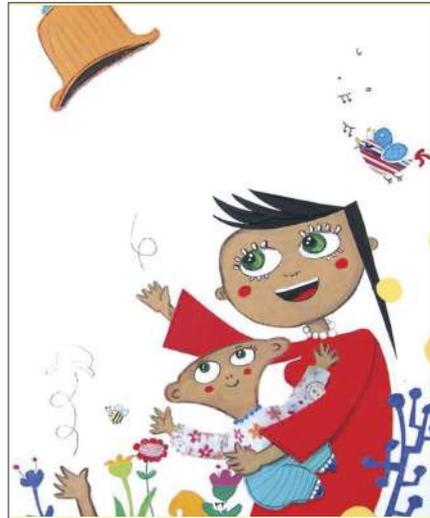
What a hat!

Now everybody wanted to try on the new hat.

Hatless said to them: “Underneath all of your hats is a hat like mine.”

They lifted their hats little by little until they were all hatless!

From that time on, people were not born with hats on their heads anymore. The people of the city celebrated by tossing their hats into the air in salute to Hatless, whose courage had helped them discover a beautiful, colourful world.



*Translated by Nancy Roberts*

# Thirty Poems for Children

## by Jawdat Fakhreddine



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Jawdat Fakhreddine is a Lebanese poet and emeritus professor of Arabic literature and criticism at the Lebanese University in Beirut. He was born in 1953 in a small village in southern Lebanon.

His first collection of poems, *Uqassiru 'an Hubbik* (I Fall Short of Loving You), was published in 1979. He has since published over ten poetry collections including *Manaraton lil-ghariq* (A Lighthouse for the Drowning, 1996), *Samawat* (Skies, 2002), *Hadiqat al-sittin* (The Garden of Sixty, 2016). He also has a collection of essays of literary criticism *Al-Iyqa' wa al-zaman: kitabat fi naqd al-shi'r* (Rhythm and Time: Writings in the Criticism of Poetry, 1995). His PhD dissertation *Shakl al-qasida al-arabiyya* (Form in the Arabic Qasida) was presented at Saint Joseph University in Beirut and supervised by the poet Adonis. It was first published in book form in 1984, with a second edition in 1995, and a third in 2003. His poetry has been translated to French, German, and English.

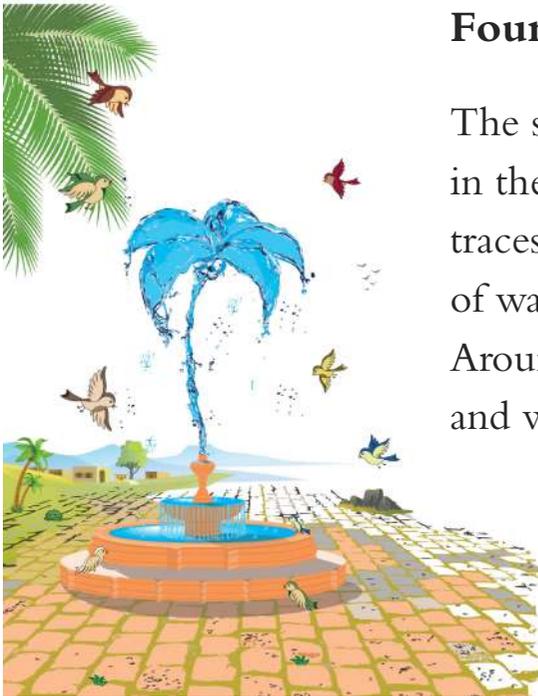
### About the Book

With vivid imagery and an appealing use of Arabic meters and rhymes, the poems in this book explore nature, family, school, play, and boundless world of the imagination. The diverse themes and sounds in *Thirty Poems for Children* cultivate cognitive and contemplative senses along with unique layout and drawings of the book. The thirty poems deliver an important educational message in simple, yet captivating language, and prompt children to think creatively through their senses and imagination.

Published by Dar al-Hadaek Beirut, 2013. ISBN: 9789953496979.  
Hardcover, 65 pages. Original title: *Thalathoun Qaassida lil-Atfal*.

*Four poems  
from*

## *Thirty Poems for Children*



### **Fountain**

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The singing fountain  
in the large square  
traces a small tree  
of water in the air.  
Around it, doves flutter  
and winds flare.

## **Mother**

Always I call, Mother.  
When I am happy or sad  
afraid or cold.  
I call to her  
when in luck or love or joy.  
Now or later, here or there  
I'll always be in search of her.

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## Birds

The birds sing their sweetest tune,  
between twig and twig they chatter.  
I see them and rejoice when they see me.  
I fly to them. They scatter.



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## Thoughts

Thoughts, thoughts, thoughts . . .  
crowded in my mind.  
I don't know where they come from.  
When one is born in my mind  
like a surprise,  
it springs and grows  
and then blooms  
like a rose!

## Dream

In my dreams when I sleep  
many shining things parade

I reach for them, they giggle.

I grasp at them, they fade.

*Translated by Huda Fakhreddine  
with Samaa and Ahmad Almallah*



# *The Boy Who Saw the Colour of Air*

by *Abdo Wazen*



Abdo Caesar Wazen, from Lebanon, was born in 1957 in Dekwaneh, Beirut. He completed his secondary education at the Apostles' College in Jounieh, and received his university degree from St. Joseph's University. He also studied at Paris-Est Créteil Val-de-Marne University. Wazen has worked in cultural journalism since 1979, and is also a literary critic. He received the Cultural Journalism Award from the Dubai Press Club in 2005, and has published research papers, several translations, and collections of poetry and novels, including *Life is Off* (2009), *Poets of the World* (2010), and *Accounts of the Lebanese War* (2010).

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## *About the Book*

The novel, whose main character Bassem is a 13-year-old boy who has been blind from birth, takes on a subject that is often neglected in young people's literature, that of life for people in society who have disabilities and special needs. The author's beautiful narrative language discusses questions of fundamental ethical and human values in the lives of young people, as well as the importance of reading itself. Bassem shows strong will and determination in overcoming the many obstacles he faces in order to achieve his goal of learning to read by using braille, and thus opening up his world.

Publisher: Arab Scientific Publishers, Beirut, Lebanon, 2011. ISBN: 9786140103412. 119 Pages. Original Title: *Al-Fata al-ladhi Absara Lawna al-Hawa'*.

*An excerpt from*

## *The Boy Who Saw the Colour of Air*

BASSEM WOKE up unusually early that day. The cock hadn't yet crowed when he got out of bed. He looked around him and listened to the silence that reigned in the room, punctuated sporadically by his father's snoring. His mother was still asleep in bed alongside his younger sister Suad. His brothers, Ahmad and Suheil, lay on the mattress on the floor next to his bed. His father, Munif, was asleep in his own bed by the window looking out on the garden. The bedroom held the whole family. Next to it was the large room called the sitting-room, where the family received guests.

Bassem didn't know what time it was. He felt his way to the bathroom, then out to the large terrace, where he sat on the sofa there, which was damp from the night air. He knew he was up before the cockcrow that marked the break of dawn. Seated on the sofa, he looked up and felt the gentle breeze that blew from the direction of the garden. He rubbed his eyes to wipe away the traces of the tears that he couldn't hold back. Bassem knew he hadn't slept that night. He had spent most of the night tossing and turning in bed and maybe for the first time had felt that the night was long, longer than he had experienced before. In fact, maybe he felt the night had been darker than other nights, darker even than the pitch dark he had lived in since he had come into



the world. The night drawing to a close had been long and hard. It was the last night he would sleep in his own bed with his brothers beside him. The house, every corner of which he knew by heart, had long been dear to him, as well as the large porch and the terrace, as they called it, where he spent many days and nights, especially in summer, relishing the first hours of the morning, the sunset and nightfall.

Bassem sat alone on the sofa, his heart wrenched by an unfamiliar sadness, the sadness of farewell or of parting, because today the local mayor would come and take him to an institute for the blind in the suburbs of the capital Beirut. At noon that day he would leave his family, his house, his garden, and the village whose open spaces had been the playgrounds of his childhood. Starting at noon he would enter a new world and live a life of which he knew nothing, except the little he had heard from the mayor who had visited the family to convince his mother that her son should go to the institute. His father was already fully persuaded that the institute would change the life of his thirteen-year-old son for the better. In his heart his father felt that Bassem had wasted many years without learning any special skills or having lessons designed for the blind. He was certain that his son was very intelligent and capable of learning. But his mother, Bahiya, couldn't bear the idea of parting with her blind son. She couldn't imagine Bassem living away from home. She had been very attached to him since he was born and gave him plenty of sympathy and kindness. Bassem was at the centre of her life. Bassem's sister and brothers didn't receive the same care and attention as Bassem. But they weren't envious of him, because he was their eldest brother and blind, and they felt for him in secret, especially when they realised they would move ahead of him in many ways, except for his ability to remember and his patience when listening to the books read to him, primarily the Qur'an.

At first Bahiya had refused to let him leave home and go to the institute because she thought he would become a child of the institute, rather than her child, and that his life there would prevent him coming back to the family. The mayor found it hard to persuade her, but in the end she agreed, out of deference to Bassem's wishes and the insistence of her husband, who was aware of her strong bond to her blind son and didn't want to break that bond. His mother suffered inside without showing her pain in front of her children. She thought she was the reason for the disease her son had inherited. When Bassem was born no one knew he was blind. Even Umm Ibrahim, the midwife who delivered Bassem at home, hadn't realised he

was blind. He was a healthy baby with a cheerful face and full of vigour. Within a few days he was quick to seek out his mother and suckle on her breast. Whenever she put him in his cot, he would give a little smile. The smile delighted his mother and then his father and then the midwife when she visited the family a few days later to check on their first-born child, because babies don't usually smile in their first week. The smile was a beautiful surprise and everyone expected it to be a good omen. Soon everyone agreed to call the baby Bassem, or "smiler". He had been born smiling so how could he not be called Bassem? His mother didn't notice that he couldn't see: his eyelids blinked like ordinary eyelids and his eyes moved left and right. But what puzzled her was a small amount of white liquid that seeped from his eyes and gathered on his eyeballs. All she could do was clean it away every day, just as she cleaned the baby's face and the rest of his body.

For poor families the midwife stood in for a doctor and took care of children until they were a month old. So she was Bassem's doctor as the baby rapidly grew. Within two months winter began to encroach. Baby Bassem caught a cold and had a temperature. His mother had to take him to the paediatrician in the neighbouring village. The village women visited this doctor when their children fell ill. When the doctor examined Bassem he realised immediately that he had a bad cold. He reassured Bassem's parents about the cold, but then he noticed with dismay the white substance that gathered around the baby's eyes. He waved his fingers in front of the baby's eyes and noticed that they didn't respond. They did move but they didn't appear to be seeing. The doctor was suspicious but didn't bring up the subject with Bassem's parents. He suggested that as soon as Bassem's health improved they take him to an eye clinic in the southern town of Sidon. He wrote a report and gave it to them to present to the doctor who would examine the baby. Three days later the cold had gone, Bassem's temperature had subsided and he had recovered his smile and his usual vigour, and was making baby noises again. Bassem's parents made an appointment with one of the doctors at the clinic and took him there. At the clinic the nurse took Bassem from Bahiya, carried him into a back room and asked his parents to wait while Bassem had his eyes tested. They waited about half an hour. Bahiya was very anxious and Munif tried to calm her down. Then the nurse brought the baby out and told Munif the doctor wanted to speak to him in private. Bahiya hugged Bassem tight, rocked him and stroked his head.

Munif was shocked when the doctor told him that Bassem couldn't see.

"I'm sorry to give you this painful news," the doctor said. "The baby was born blind, but we'll do some more tests to find out more about his condition and establish the reason that lies behind it. It's probably a hereditary condition. Have there been any blind people in your family or your wife's family?"

"Not that I know of," said Munif. "At least, there aren't any blind people in my family." But then he added quickly: "Oh . . . yes, my wife's grandfather was blind."

"Bring the baby back in a week and I'll take him to the hospital for some more rigorous tests," the doctor said, as he stood up and fetched two small bottles of medicine from a cupboard. "Put two drops in the baby's eyes three times a day and bring him back in a week. Your baby's in good health but unfortunately he can't see. Try to tell your wife gently because it's bound to be a great shock to her. She's a mother and you know how mothers are."

Munif left the room, his face downcast, but soon suppressed his sadness, smiled and kissed baby Bassem so that Bahiya wouldn't be suspicious, and they left for home.

Back home Bahiya set about putting the drops in Bassem's eyes in the belief that it would get rid of the rheum in his eyes. Munif was troubled and sad. At night he went out on the terrace and cried to himself as silently as he could. He was anxious, very anxious. How could he tell his wife about the baby? How could he confront her with the truth?

Soon after coming back from seeing the doctor, one evening Munif went to the home of his elder brother Abbas. The house was nearby, on the edge of their farmland, which was their livelihood. When Munif entered the house, Abbas was surprised to see him so gloomy and troubled.

"What's the matter, brother?" he asked.

Munif sat on the sofa and started to sob. Abbas's wife heard him crying and came in to find out what was wrong.

"What's the matter, brother?" Abbas asked again. He got up from his chair and went over to Munif.

"Terrible news, brother. Really terrible," Munif said and carried on crying.

"What is it? Tell us. Stop crying and tell us. What is this terrible news?"

"It's Bassem, brother, Bassem."

"What's wrong with him? Has he had a fall? Is he ill? My wife was at your place just two hours ago and the baby was fine."

"No one but me knows about it, brother. Even my wife doesn't know."

“Tell me. I can’t take it any longer.”

“He’s blind. Bassem’s blind. He was born blind. He can’t see. A blind child!” cried Munif, weeping and groaning, bemoaning his luck and the luck of his child.

The news hit Abbas and his wife like a thunderbolt. His wife started crying in turn. The news was very painful to hear: Bassem was Munif’s first child and to have one’s first child born blind was unbelievable. What a fate! Everyone fell silent as if struck speechless. Even Abu Bassem was speechless after he stopped crying. Except for the gurgling of baby Zeinab, who was playing on the carpet, the silence was total.

A few moments later, Munif looked up and wiped away the last of his tears. “I came to you to find a way we can tell Bahiya about it,” he said in a trembling voice. “I can’t tell her alone, but she has to know, and she’ll find out sooner or later.”

Abbas and his wife still said nothing, the shock was so great. The two brothers were very close. They worked together, spent the evenings together and their houses were like a single house. When Bassem was born, both houses were overjoyed and both households thought of Bassem as their child. Abbas and Munif were the only members of the family who hadn’t left the village for Beirut. Their other three brothers had decided to move to the city after growing bored with the farming business. From there the youngest had gone to the Ivory Coast in Africa to work with his wife’s relatives.

All three of them looked very disturbed. Umm Zeinab said she would never dare tell her sister-in-law about it. She would never be able to do such a thing and couldn’t bear to see her sister-in-law, who was like a sister to her, scream and sob and faint. Even Abbas said he wouldn’t be able to handle such a situation. The three of them agreed to look for the right way to tell Bahiya the truth.

Three days passed without them coming to a solution. They were very worried about the immediate effect the news would have on Bahiya. She might collapse in a faint. She might start screaming. But they decided to tell her, whatever happened. The baby would need more tests in three days’ time and then his mother was bound to find out.

When Abbas and his wife arrived at Munif’s house, Bahiya greeted them with Bassem in her arms. They sat on the sofa. Bahiya called her husband, who was in the kitchen, and he came and sat close to them. The three of them nodded to each other, giving Abbas permission to speak. Abbas hes-

itated and then turned to address Bahiya, who sat on a chair, leaving Bassem in his cot. Abbas told her the truth calmly and slowly. He broke the news little by little to reduce the shock. He told her that when the doctor took Munif aside in the clinic he had told him the baby had poor eyesight and needed treatment. When Bahiya heard this, she rose from her seat in distress, as if her maternal intuition told her it was something more terrible. She suddenly remembered how her husband had been alone with the doctor, though she hadn't paid much attention at the time.

She went over to Abbas and said: "Tell me. What's the story of this poor eyesight? Are you telling the truth or are you hiding something worse from me?" She started weeping profusely. Munif stood up, held her in his arms and started to cry too. Umm Zeinab cried too: she couldn't hold back her tears. Even Abbas cried. "Bassem can't see, Bahiya," said Munif. "Bassem, our child, can't see." His voice shook and his crying grew louder. Bahiya couldn't believe what they had told her. She shrieked and started to wail and sob. Then she collapsed onto the sofa. Her sister-in-law fetched a bottle of rose water and sprinkled some on her face. Bahiya came around but soon fainted again. All Umm Zeinab could do was sprinkle more rose water and stroke her head until she came around again, in a daze and in torment, sobbing quietly. Umm Zeinab helped her lie down on the sofa and sat beside her, while Abbas and Munif sat on a sofa opposite. All of them except Bahiya were silent. She was weeping and sobbing. She looked at her baby and cried.

Umm Zeinab didn't leave Bahiya that evening. She stayed up all night, keeping watch by her side. Bahiya spent the night crying and didn't doze off until dawn, when fatigue finally overcame her. When she woke in the morning, she looked around and saw her son playing in his cot. She tried to get up but couldn't. Her sister-in-law helped her into the bathroom. When she came back and sat on the sofa, she burst into tears again. "Why my son?" she asked in a broken voice. "Bassem. Why Bassem? I wish I had lost my sight, not him." Her husband sat near her and tried to console her. "It's the will of God. It's the will of God," he said.

Bahiya was so frail that she lay in bed for days, nursed by her sister-in-law, who never left her. She wept, held her baby to her breast and wept. Weeping became her constant companion, by day and by night. Bahiya cried endlessly, although she knew crying was pointless and wouldn't help her baby to see.

A month after the shock Bahiya rose from her torpor. One morning she woke up full of resolve. She performed her prayers and decided to put this

painful episode in her life behind her and open a new page. She told herself that from now on she wouldn't consider her son to be blind. "I'll be at his service to help him overcome all the difficulties he faces," she said. Bahiya thanked God for the strength He had given her that morning and felt that she had come back to life again. She looked forward to having more children to be brothers or sisters for Bassem. That morning she felt at peace with the world. She set about organising the household, ignoring her sadness and trusting in the will of God.

On the terrace, Bassem sat on the sofa where he had long been accustomed to sit alone, especially when his brothers and sister went off to the village school. He felt rather tired after his sleeplessness the previous night. He hadn't sleep well during what he had told himself was his last night at home. Today a new life would begin, or rather another life of which he knew little. He had tears in his eyes but he decided not to cry, especially in front of his mother, so as not to make her sadder than she was. A gentle autumn breeze began to blow, brushing his face. How can I part with this breeze, our village breeze, he wondered. "How can I part with the smell of the flowers, the trees and the grass? How can I live without the evenings chatting on this sofa when the air is mild and fresh? And the fields, how could I leave them, the fields that have opened their arms to me since I was young, where I went for walks with my friends? And the river, who could take my place sitting on the banks and listening to the babbling of the water?"

Bassem had thought about all these things all night. He couldn't imagine living away from the village, without the images he had formed through his senses without seeing them with his eyes. Was morning in the city like the moist, fragrant mornings in his village? Was night in the city like the moonlit summer nights on the terrace? Bassem loved the moon even though he had never seen it. He would ask his family and friends to tell him about it, how silver it was and about all the forms it took. He imagined the moon as a crescent, as they sometimes described it to him. When there was once a lunar eclipse he felt slightly sad and kept asking his mother when the moon would reappear. He couldn't quite take in what it meant to have a lunar eclipse or how it happened, and his mother couldn't explain it to him.

When the cock crowed Munif got up and expected to see Bassem in bed, hoping they could wash and perform the dawn prayers together. When he didn't find him he went to the terrace and Bassem was there, getting

up from the sofa. They said their prayers and sat outside. His father was drinking coffee, which he had made himself so as not to wake up his exhausted wife. She hadn't slept well, either, he had noticed her tossing and turning in bed during the night. The night had been hard for Munif and Bahiya as well as for Bassem. The day would be even harder because it would be time to say their farewells.

Minutes later Bahiya got up to pray. It wasn't fully light yet and there were still streaks of darkness in the house. She made breakfast and put it on the table outside, and the three of them sat down to eat. Bahiya couldn't swallow anything. She had a lump in her throat. Munif didn't have the breakfast he usually had before going out to the fields as he wasn't going to work that day. He would wait for the mayor to drive over at noon to take Bassem to the institute. The three of them sat there almost silent. What could they talk about? Bassem was going away, leaving a huge void in the life of the family, especially in the life of his mother. The idea of leaving was very hard. Bahiya hadn't adapted to it, nor his father, his brothers or his sister. Could this boy, who had spent thirteen years among them and had been their main preoccupation, leave them so suddenly? Could Bassem's mother brace herself to part with her blind son, who was the apple of her eye? How could she prepare herself?

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Who will look after my son, she thought. Who will prepare his meals? Who will wash his clothes? She didn't have a clear idea about the institute where the blind children lived. She was worried her son might be lonely there and no one would be kind to the young boy. She was worried he wouldn't find anyone to talk to, since he preferred to keep himself to himself.

Two days earlier Munif had told her: "Don't worry. Life in the institute will be better than here. Bassem will learn things, and that's his dream and our dream. We'll have to harden our hearts for his sake. You know how much he loves to listen to people reading, how much he loves books and listening to stories. We'll have to set our emotions aside so that he can find his own way in the world. The institute will be like a second home to him. When I went with the mayor to enrol him the principal took us around the facilities. You can't imagine how well the blind children live there. They're all ages. There are some children six years old. Imagine. There are playgrounds, gardens, reading rooms and modern equipment. There's a clinic. In the institute Bassem will live as part of a community, with his friends. He'll get a qualification and find a job. He'll fulfil his desire to read stories and books, which he will love. He won't be beholden to anyone

for any favours. He'll be able to read for himself and won't need anyone to read to him."

Munif was referring to the big white books with raised dots on the pages that the principal had shown him at the institute. She had explained that blind people could read them with their fingers. His father hadn't quite grasped the concept of reading with your fingers or how those books worked, but he pretended to understand and acted impressed. But the only thing that upset him was when the principal suddenly criticised him while she was showing him around. "It's rather late to bring your son to the institute," she said. "Here blind children his age have already made plenty of progress with academic work, vocational work and sport. I wish you had brought him years ago and then he would have had plenty of time to learn. Now his classmates will be younger than him, but it doesn't matter. We're all friends here and the institute is like one big family."

Munif had also told Bahiya not to forget that they would be paying very little for his board and tuition fees at the institute. "It's free, and financed by many organisations," he had explained. "We have just to buy him his clothes and give him some pocket money so he feels he can buy what he likes from the shop at the institute."

Abu Bassem rose from his chair, smiled despite himself and turned to Bassem. "You'll be a man, my son, as I always taught you to be. You're thirteen years old but you're more mature than the other boys in the neighbourhood. You may be young but you can take responsibility. From now onwards you'll be responsible for yourself. At the institute you'll learn and master a vocation, whatever it might be – a vocation that you choose. You'll read lots of things there, my boy. They'll teach you how to read for yourself and you'll also be able to write, the principal told me. One day you might be able to write down the stories that you make up in your head and tell to your brothers and friends here."



The foundation of the Award was laid out in memory of the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, ruler of Abu Dhabi and President of the UAE, and his pioneering role in national unity and the country's development. It is presented every year to outstanding Arab writers, intellectuals, publishers as well as young talents whose writings and translations of humanities have scholarly and objectively enriched Arab cultural, literary and social life.

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