

Abdulah Hakam
Idris al-Saghir
Mohammed Mesud al-Ajami
Abdul Sattar Nassir
Adil Kamil
Hadiya Hussein
Zakariyya Tamir
Fakhri Qaawar
Salwa Bakr

STORIES BY REBELLIOUS
ARAB WRITERS

12

IMPOSSIBLES.

Selected and translated from Arabic into Serbian
by Srpko Leštarić

Translated from Serbian into English
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Published in cooperation between the European Cultural Foundation
and the Next Page Foundation

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Translation from Serbian into English

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The editor and publishers did their best to ensure the consent of all the Arab writers included in this collection to publish their works in English. However, due to the circumstances masterfully described in the editor's notes "Stories about Stories", some of the authors or their descendants were untraceable.

Content

TELLING STORIES ABOUT A CULTURE OF RESISTANCE AND DISSENT Milena Dragičević Šešić	05	STORIES ABOUT STORIES Srpkó Leštarić	
1. Abdulah Hakam Appendix to the Report on the Individual Who Goes by the Name of Ali ibn Alwan	09	1. A Note about the Author, Story and Title	83
2. Idris al-Saghir The Confiscation of Mr Vladi's Voice	14	2. The Indestructible Little Man or the Phantom Resurrection of Suspects in the Contemporary Arabic Short Story	90
3. Mohammed Mesud al-Ajami When Horses Ripened	18	3. About the Story, the Writer and the Translation	94
4. Abdul Sattar Nassir Our Lord Caliph	22	4-5. A Note about the Author, the Prison and the Function of a Coffeehouse	97
5. Abdul Sattar Nassir Hasan Ajami's Coffeehouse	31	6. A Note about the Author	106
6. Adil Kamil The City of Silence	39	7. A Note about the Author	107
7. Hadiya Hussein The Blizzard	43	8-9. The Fantasy of Harsh Satire	109
8. Zakariyya Tamir The House of Many Chambers	46	10. A Note about the Author	111
9. Zakariyya Tamir The Reward	61	11-12. Salwa Bakr – Solace and Protests	112
10. Fakhri Qaawar The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil	63		
11. Salwa Bakr How the Peasant Woman Kneads Her Dough	68		
12. Salwa Bakr Off Flew the Little Birdie	78	POST SCRIPTUM	115

Telling Stories about a Culture of Resistance and Dissent

Milena Dragičević Šešić

Who is the author of this book? In one sense, it is Srpko Leštarić, the Serbian translator and writer who started his professional career in Yugoslavia during the period when the Non-Aligned Movement brought Yugoslav businesses into contact with many of the newly created post-colonial states in Africa and Asia. Unlike his colleagues, Srpko spent his evenings and every free moment at literary clubs and cafés from Damascus to Cairo discussing cultural issues with writers and other artists, as well as broader questions related to freedom of speech, censorship of literary magazines and publishing constraints. Back in Belgrade, he took advantage of the new freedom granted to literary journals in the 1980s (*Književna reč*) to publish his translations and comments about the then-unknown world of contemporary Arabic literature. Hence, this book developed over a long span of time, as he collected stories about patterns of resistance throughout the Arab world. As he gained the friendship and trust of numerous writers who saw in him a guarantee that their censored words would somehow reach an audience, Leštarić also gained access to the most dangerous information and texts and eventually saw in them the potential to create a unique book – a book of provocative, meaningful stories of dissent.

These twelve forbidden (censored) stories, followed by nine stories in which Srpko describes the fate of the authors, their texts, and the way he succeeded in getting them, constitute both a perfect book about resistance and the culture of dissent, as well as an analysis of the cultural scenes in different Arab countries.

For every story, Srpkó precisely describes the context and the circumstances under which he was assigned the task of saving the work for the future and making it known, yet without endangering the author. In Srpkó's stories, Arab cultural life comes alive as vibrant, mutually dependent, resistant, provocative and brave. Leštarić shows how integrated the Arab cultural scene is: describing his efforts to trace the authors who publish under pseudonyms; debating with new editorial boards that replaced previous ones because the old ones were "politically unsuitable"; how regimes succeed in "helping" cultural organizations lose institutional memory (meaning the memory of dissent); and discovering Arab inter-textuality (Salwa Bakr's story refers to Zakariyya Tamir's story). Leštarić's micro-narratives are more helpful in fully understanding the cultural landscape of the countries in question than any statistical data. The book can also be read partially as an "action story" about smuggling texts across borders, spreading messages and transmitting ideas to the world. It is also a story about friendship and solidarity, showing the importance of every small window to the world – which is what Srpkó represented to many Arab writers.

Perhaps the most impressive quality of Srpkó's work overall is his ability to understand contemporary Arab culture and contexts and to select for translation the best and most representative novels, some of them otherwise unknown and untranslated in the Western world. He has translated numerous novels, including two books for children: *Why Did the River Become Silent?* (2002) and *My Invisible Friend* (2008), both by Zakariyya Tamir; several books by Salwa Bakr; *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih, and many books and stories by Abd Al-Sattar Naser, among others. All of these texts come from different regions and sometimes even use very different dialects of Arabic. He personally collected and adequately translated *The Fisherman's Daughter: An Anthology of Iraqi Folk Stories* (1998) using different dialects of the Serbo-Croatian language(s). All of these books were published in Yugoslavia and Serbia by the most renowned publishers.

The present book is much more than just a translation, however. As noted above, Srpkó Leštarić did not plan to collect such stories, he did not choose them from journals and books. In fact, the police and state security services in the repressive Arab states chose the stories and authors to be censored and imprisoned. The authors or their friends found "creative ways" to hand copies of forbidden magazines or manuscripts to Srpkó Leštarić as the only guarantee of their preservation. He immediately recognized the value of these stories and the necessity

of describing how he had gotten them. The title *12 Impossibles* reflects that these stories were selected from a “culture of dissent”, from a tradition of resistance – they are unsuitable writers and unsuitable stories. The book was finally published in Belgrade in 2005 as an anthology of the culture of Arab resistance.

The first group of three stories uses symbols and metaphors which allude to the immortality (invincibility) of the resistance; they refer to government efforts to control and destroy free voices. The character Ibn Alvan, reappearing at different historical moments, despite the fact that he is killed by the regime every time, personifies the indestructibility and sustainability of a culture of resistance. The indestructible voice of the school teacher, Mr Vladi, still echoes through the school, although he was taken from his class and “disappeared.” All these are strong metaphors for the culture of rebellion and resistance. The second group of stories reflects life in totalitarian states. “The City of Silence” is an excellent metaphorical title, expressing the artists’ worst nightmare – bans and prohibitions on speaking. Finally, the third group of stories addresses individuals’ capacity to resist oppression, to raise their voices, to choose independent paths – or to enter the world of corruption and dishonesty for a small reward and comfort.

In 2005, the same year *12 Impossibles* appeared in Serbian, I was invited by the European Cultural Foundation to design and implement a training program in art management for eight Arab countries (through the Cairo-based cultural NGO Al Mawred al Thakafy). As preparation, I read all the books of Arabic literature I could find in Serbian. Among those books, one struck me as crucially important for cultural managers: *12 Impossibles*, translated by Srško Leštarić, whose name repeatedly appeared on many of the books I was reading and whom I had not met before. During the training sessions in Cairo and Aman, I realized that none of my Arab colleagues had read any of those stories and that many of the authors were unknown to them, having been censored and often distanced from public life. Thus, I started advocating for the publication of this book in Arabic, as I felt it was extremely important that Arab audiences read it and discuss its messages - especially cultural managers and cultural policy makers. At that moment, publishing the book was still unimaginable in the region due to its clear political significance, so I started thinking about how to present the book to the world audience through English. Fortunately, today, many years later, the book is now ready to enter the world – which is so full of prejudices and stereotypes against Arabs despite some temporary changes in

world media representation during the Arab Spring movements. Now, when the whole Arab world is between the rock and the hard place of macro and micro politics, since the current situation – with civil wars, millions of refugees, terrorists attacks, the rise of fundamentalist groups, etc. – is far worse than was expected when the liberal intelligentsia started leading civil protests from Tunisia to Syria, this book nevertheless bears witness to the fact that this desire for justice, dignity and freedom has existed for a long time, as an ideal that numerous artists who later took the lead in different activities related to Arab Spring had long been striving towards. In the carnivalesque atmosphere of the street protests in Tunisian, Moroccan and Egyptian cities, artists who had been silenced for a long time finally got the chance to enter freely into public debate without the necessary metaphors and cryptic language which predominates in the twelve stories collected and presented by Srško Leštarić long before Arab Spring had begun to take shape. These stories represent in the best possible ways not only the tradition of storytelling, but also the culture of rebellion and dissent which have always been a suppressed part of Arab societies.

Now, when Arab Spring has given way to new forms of authoritarianism and both globalized and national elites are disillusioned with its results, this book is once again extremely topical. It underscores the many challenges that the Arab intelligentsia still faces in creating institutions and organizations capable of leading processes of democratization. Thus, the major result that the English-language edition of this book can hope to achieve is an eventual appearance in its original form – in Arabic, allowing these stories to finally be read and discussed in Arab countries, thus becoming a true part of Arab cultural heritage.

We hope that there will be Arab publishers ready to contribute to such an endeavor, to put an end to “The City of Silence”, such that the metaphorical title of one of the twelve stories no longer applies to the whole region. If published in Arabic, this book could also help foster and endorse processes tied to the fight for freedom of expression, which is so necessary there, as well as throughout the world.

1

Appendix to the Report on the Individual Who Goes by the Name of Ali ibn Alwan

At exactly seven o'clock in the evening, the individual in question, going by the name of Ali ibn Alwan, entered the coffeehouse with a newspaper under his arm and, as usual, headed over to the dark corner where he sat every time. The other one was already there waiting for him, babyfaced and with some sort of a smile in his eyes. He took off his raincoat and sat down. He stared into the face of the other one and mumbled a few words which we could not discern. However, by lip reading, we came to the conclusion that he had repeated his habitual sentence: "So... what's up?... Surely there's nothing new!?"

When the lad who works in the coffeehouse came over to them he ordered a tea while at the same time chivying him along with a wave of his hand. But when the tea arrived, he said something else to the lad. His lips stretched into a sweet smile. He delved into his pocket, pulled out some money and gave it to the lad. When we enquired about this later to find out what he had said to him, he admitted that Ibn Alwan had reminded him about something which had happened on one of the previous days, when he had forgotten to pay his bill.

Of course, this explanation should not prevent us from emphasising that Ibn Alwan very often establishes close relationships with common workers and allows them to sit and talk with him. Concerned that such relations could develop further, we alerted the coffeehouse's owner that without fail he should change his staff from time to time, something which he wholeheartedly accepted without the slightest pressure or insistence on our part.

At five minutes past seven, Ibn Alwan again smiled, but prior to this moved his slippers, and in doing so gave a sign to the other one. We must note here that until this moment we had not known, despite all of the possibilities which you placed at our disposal, that this other person (who sticks to Ibn Alwan more than his own name) was also called Ali ibn Alwan. We looked over our records and searched

through our files but could not find either a single photo of him or the smallest bit of information about him. This alerted us, so we assigned three experienced men to follow him. However, in spite of this, each time he managed to evade them in thoroughly unexpected ways!

Naturally, this could not be an obstruction for us so on one occasion we brought him in for questioning. On that occasion we discovered that he cannot hear, nor is he able to speak. We were forced to let him go because of this.

We are bound, nevertheless, to emphasise that this deaf-mute, who claims that he himself is called Ali ibn Alwan, is no less dangerous than the Ali ibn Alwan whom you know from our earlier reports. The danger lies in the strange way in which he communicates. What we are talking about is some sort of new method, the secret of which we have yet to get to the bottom of.

We wrote to the Bureau of Citizenship about this dual collusion, asking that they provide us with the information which they have at their disposal on both of the Alis, to which we received the following answer, filed on 15.09.1970:

To the attention of the Head of the General Investigation Department:

In response to your memo (Classified No. 242) from 23 November 1967, with regards to the data which is available in our records on the respective parties going by the name of Ali ibn Alwan, we wish to inform you that following a thorough investigation and detailed evaluation we have no mention of either of them in our files.

We remind you, however, that an old set of files did exist from 1947/1948, but that we previously received orders from you to destroy them due to the multitude of strictly confidential and potentially dangerous data which they contained.

We are unaware as to whether those named had dossiers in these files. Since both of the respective parties possess identification documents issued by our Bureau, according to the numbers and dates which you cite in the report, this would indicate that the aforementioned assumption is unfounded. We remain at your disposal for subsequent investigations and checks – and the keys to success are in God's hands.

Signature:

Head of the Bureau for Passports and Citizenship

At ten minutes past seven Ali ibn Alwan laughed: “Ha! Now I know precisely everything that they’re aiming for,” was what he said.

The other did not utter a single word to this. He did not even move his hands, rather he left them to lie ostensibly indifferently, in front of him, on the table. His eyes were expressionlessly nailed to the glass wall of the coffeehouse. We are not sure, however, whether or not he moved his feet under the table because the darkness in the corner where they sat prevented us from seeing this clearly.

Ibn Alwan responded to this through a smile: “No, no – those are just the facts! There’s nothing to speculate about – there’s absolutely nothing to discuss!”

The other raised his hand and scratched his head. Both of them laughed, and then this other one took out a piece of paper and a pen from his pocket and wrote something down.

We here must emphasise that it was only with this that we became aware that the pair communicate by writing. Ibn Alwan took the piece of paper, read it, then wrote something else down – the clock at this point showing that it was twenty past seven – and the other then took back the paper, read it, lit a match and burned it!

We did not manage to find out what was written on that piece of paper, although we are convinced that it is closely related to the plot which is being hatched against the state, which our great allied nation’s Great Agency has already warned us about.

Ibn Alwan spoke very loudly the whole time, but we know that this was just a ploy to mislead us, to deliberately usher us off in the wrong direction from that which he himself was taking – especially when it is known that we closely followed practically his every move and that every individual with whom he was in any sort of contact has ended up in prison.

Were it possible for us to follow the directions of the Great Agency, which say that the second Ibn Alwan should be arrested and that information should be extracted from him, we firmly believe that we would succeed in thwarting all of the plans which those two individuals are cooking up.

At this point we must provide the following note: we once again interrogated the deaf-mute Ali ibn Alwan, this time by a method of writing. We wrote him several questions, to which he took a pencil and wrote down his answers. But, reading those answers, we did not succeed in learning anything, with the exception of one

single thing: the name *Ali ibn Alwan*, which he wrote *before* the question “What is your name?”. Everything else was completely illegible. Even the graphologists, whom we had called to help us, confirmed that during all of their studies and many years of work they had never encountered such a style of writing; moreover, they took the stance that what he had written was not even letters, rather mere scribbles which do not carry any definite meaning.

Those answers are still in our laboratories, where they are being studied and examined. At the same time, our interest in the two Alis compelled us to call upon the help of our great allied nation’s Great Agency’s apparatus, and thus we received the following report:

To the attention of Head of the General Investigative Department:

In response to your memos (Classified No. 228 and No. 339) from 23rd October 1973, requesting that we offer you the information which we possess regarding the two individuals going by the name of Mister Alwan, we are pleased to be able to inform you that we have found the relevant data in our files.

According to our data, a tribal chief going by this name appeared in Yemen at the time of the Abyssinian occupation.¹ More precisely, the same appeared in the town of Hajah. Relying upon the narratives provided by those who knew him personally, legend says that the so-named taught the people of that land law and grammar, as well as holding sermons in the temple at the end of each evening prayers. These gatherings played a huge role in the subsequent expulsion of the Abyssinians from Yemen. Our information furthermore reveals that the named was trapped and murdered and that the Yemenis built a mausoleum which bears his name to this very day.

Following this, he appeared again in a village in Nubia, in Egypt, where above all else he played a prominent role in the bloody events which were then raging throughout Egypt.² The authorities, however, did not manage to capture him. After this, news about him ceases to emerge.

Nevertheless, Mister Alwan did appear again. This was about twenty-six years ago, in Britain’s capital city when one of the universities there witnessed the appearance of a rebellious young Arab whose picture resembles the photograph which you attached to your report. That young man, with a number of young

¹ The middle of the 6th century. (This and all following footnotes by Srpkó Leštarić – E.A.)

² This concerns events from the 19th century.

Arabs and young people from the third world, carried out several illegal activities. They founded a secret society and their supporters spread throughout the countries which the Free World held under its control. The British authorities arrested both him and a number of his companions. In the report which we received, it states that Mister Alwan met his death during an attempt by British authorities to extract information from him.

We, however, have not worked on updating Mister Alwan's dossier for some time now due to the considerable changes which have occurred in many places in Third World countries, irrespective of the fact that until recently they found themselves under the control of the Free World.

This is the text of the report which we received. And, carefully observing the photograph which had been attached, we discovered that it looked just the same as both of those whom we suspected. We therefore ask for your permission to carry out the arrest of both one and the other of the Alis, bearing in mind that both of them are extremely dangerous individuals.

King regards etc.

APPENDIX "A", unnumbered:

We inform you that both individuals named Ali ibn Alwan became deceased during attempts which were made to extract information from them. The death of both one and the other occurred unexpectedly, meaning that we were unable to achieve any sort of findings.

APPENDIX "B", filed as No. 340:

With reference to our memos Confidential No. 338/73 and Confidential No. 339/73 from 22 and 23 October 1973, it is with the greatest regret that we must declare that the two individuals going by the name of Ali ibn Alwan have once again appeared, despite the irrefutable fact that we were previously sure of their deaths.

We note that their appearance at this point in time presents exceptional danger to our plans.

We expect your urgent directives.

The named individuals appeared on Sunday, 13 April 1975.

15 Idris al-Saghir

2

The Confiscation of Mr Vladi's Voice

Getting out of a lorry that had momentarily stopped at the place where the dirt road diverged, going through the pastures, the student was careful not to crumple the newspaper which he had bought in the town before setting off. Looking at the green fields and the weary animals in the sweltering midday heat, he inhaled the scent of camomile and took pleasure in the silence.

"There's nothing better than returning to the village," he said.

Hauling his bag, he strode across the red soil and constantly glanced at the newspaper which was under the arm with which he carried his bag. The lorry was already half way up the hill and had let out a thick cloud of black smoke. The student cast an eye at the schoolhouse, which had only two classrooms. He had completed primary school here before going off to the city. His memories were all stirred up. He quickened his pace, although the bag he was carrying was already feeling all the heavier in the midday heat.

* * *

People cried out, "It cannot be!"

The student spread the newspaper out in front of them and said "Is this his picture?"

They thronged around the newspaper until finally they formed a circle around it, craning their necks and shoving one another's shoulders. Then they said "The picture's of him, but what's it say beneath it?"

The student began to read: "With great sorrow and regret we received the news that Mr Vladi has passed away, God having given him heavenly peace and serenity."

To this, the oldest one said, "Fear God and beware the Devil! Death is circling above our heads and could strike us at any moment. Life is in God's hands. Pray to God that he forgive you for your sins!"

Abbas, who had been expelled from his secondary school in the city and so had done all sorts of jobs before returning to the village to be a day labourer with his father, said: "I know what newspapers are all about. All you've got to do is pay ten dirhams and they'll publish whatever news you want. This is just someone's tasteless joke. Don't believe a word of it, especially not now when it's the first of April."

He then withdrew.

The group did not understand the link between disbelief and the month of April. The oldest one of them again came forth "If Abbas was of any use then the school wouldn't have expelled him. He's just spouting nonsense."

* * *

Three days went by. People spoke of nothing but Mr Vladi. They went to the chief of the local police, who was a champion at card games and solving crosswords, and said "We heard that Mr Vladi died, the teacher in our school. We've harried the length and breath of the city in search of his body so that we can bury him in the village just as he wanted. We also asked his sister, who's the only one of his family we know in the city. We asked around the hospitals, police stations and at the relevant ministry, but wherever we went we just ended up coming back again."

The police chief shouted at the top of his voice, "Next time you'll have to pick one of you to represent yourselves when dealing with the local authorities. You'd better understand that in future. I'm not going to allow you to just come into my office like this in such a vulgar manner!"

That evening the people gathered together. Some crouched down, others leaned up against the earthen walls of the grocery shop, while the rest of them all sat down on the damp floor or on a stone brought from somewhere for them to rest their buttocks. Several children were sneaking around, but nobody was paying any attention to them.

The student, who had once again returned from the city, addressed them: "I enquired at the editorial offices of the newspaper which published his obituary and they gave me the address of the person who ordered it."

Relief appeared upon the faces of those present, but a desire to hear the rest of the story could be read in their countenances. Their eyes were bulging, their ears were pricked. The student continued, "But when I searched for that man, I discovered that he had provided the editorial board with a non-existent address!"

People stood aghast and clapped one palm against the other in amazement. Abbas now said, "Didn't I tell you that this was some sort of tasteless joke!?" Abbas was once again silent.

The oldest one looked at him but did not utter a word.

The student asked, "When was the last time you saw Mr Vladi?"

To this the people answered: "Two days before the school holidays. We were surprised when our children returned from school before the usual end of classes. They said that Mr Vladi had interrupted the class and ordered them not to come back to school until the end of the holidays. After that he left the village with two men who had come earlier in a white car. Maybe they were his friends."

One of the pupils called out, "They weren't his friends. I was the only one who passed by them while they were talking and I remember how they told Mr Vladi *if you don't come with us, then we'll rip your legs off!*"

The oldest one called out angrily, "Get the children out of here! This is meant to be a serious matter."

Having left with the others, this pupil whispered "Those two didn't actually tell Mr Vladi *we'll rip your legs off, but we'll rip you a new arsehole!*"

The chief at the police station shouted: "Didn't I tell you last time that you need to pick a representative who will come to address me!? You're just the most common primitives imaginable! How am I going to solve my crossword now!?"

The student returned to the city at the end of the holidays, when the pupils had once again gone off to school carrying their leather bags with them. They put them all in one classroom. But after school, the pupils reported to their parents that they had heard Mr Vladi's voice as though he was wandering around both of the rooms. They could not make out what he was saying, but could recognise his voice.

And so women called out "We hear Mr Vladi's voice all day long! It seems as though he's right next to us. But when we open a window or door there's nobody there."

The days went by and people in the village listened to Mr Vladi's voice every day. They could not see where it was coming from, but they could recognise it without mistake.

THE TESTIMONY OF THE VILLAGERS:

We saw nothing but goodness in Mr Vladi, from the very first day he arrived to teach our children. He didn't even spend a week amongst us, but he forged a bond with us and we had already grown to love him. We felt like he was one of us, as though he had been born here in our village. One day he told us, "If I die, I want you to bury me here."

TESTIMONY OF TOWN'S MILITARY GOVERNOR:

I filed so many reports about the aforementioned that I am not in a position to be able to provide a recap of everything.

THE END OF THE REPORT MADE BY THE CHIEF OF THE POLICE STATION:

"[...] And for this reason we ask that you urgently send a voice expert, tasked with the confiscation of the voice belonging to the individual by the name of Vladi, since everyday it circulates around the classrooms in the school here, and likewise around the shops and squares."

(Casablanca, Morocco)

19 Mohammed Mesud al-Ajami

2

When Horses Ripened

He is alone. He sits upon the throne of the Kingdom of Demoniana, taking care of his *things*, thinking about himself and – naturally – his subjects things...

His wife's face, at the moment when, terrified, she rushed in to him, forced him to get up. He embraced her while she wailed "The horses! I was so frightened when they were whinnying that I can't get back to sleep any more!"

She was overcome by another wave of tears. He held her in his arms and soothed her. He swore an oath.

* * *

The voice of the town crier called out, "Demos of Demoniana! Demos of Demoniana! His Lordship doth decree that all horses in all of the Kingdom's towns and villages be handed over!"

Demos of Demoniana! Whoever should violate this royal decree shall be beheaded. Demos of Demoniana! Demos of Demoniana!..."

The voice carried on into the distance, going everywhere and passing down every alleyway.

* * *

All of the horses in the Kingdom of Demoniana were gathered together and shut inside stables and paddocks which had been especially built for this purpose. Not a single horse remained beyond them.

The people were waiting. The questions were multiplying.

* * *

And once again came the town crier's voice, "Demos of Demoniana! His Lordship, may God grant that he doth live forever, bestows mercy and kindness upon you with the decree that every man should come and collect his horse and teach it not to whinny. The horses must be silent. Whoever does not comply with this decree within one week must return his horse. Demos of Demoniana!..."

People thronged around the stables. Filled with joy, they led their horses away. They tried desperately to train them to be silent and not to whinny.

Some of the horses accepted this and were silent, no longer whinnying.

Some, the noble breeds, refused to be silent. Despite all of the attempts which were being made, they continued to neigh and whinny.

Some people, as well, refused to teach their horses to be silent. They killed them with their own hands, and then bathed their dead bodies in tears.

A week later, the thoroughbred horses were once more returned to the royal stables. Stories and conjecture again passed from mouth to mouth.

"They'll kill them!"

"No they won't, but they'll pluck out their larynxes instead."

"They found some sort of medicine which makes the vocal chords go limp so that the horses can't whinny, all they can do is hiss."

"They'll torture them with starvation until they just keel over and die."

* * *

You're on your own, staring at the floor, fear is eating away at you, you can feel how panic has a grip on you. The distant, muffled sound of thunder draws ever closer, without a single streak of hope on the horizon.

And you dread the drought which encroaches from the edge of the desert, because it pledges to keep on breeding more and more.

You're always on your own, desperation and frail hope grind you to dust, you retreat into yourself. The darkness envelops you, but still – you see...

Human voices reach above the stretched silence, and the neighing and whinnying of horses.

You get up and hastily throw yourself to the ground. Your father once told you, “If you hear a suspicious stirring in the dark, don’t just stay where you are – stretch yourself out on the floor.” Your eyes, which are usually so small, are now bulging; you’re not breathing, you feel as though every moment lasts for an eternity.

The shrill, sad whinnying of the horses which are coming, the rough voices of some rough and cruel people. Your eyes are adapting to the darkness which is now no longer so opaque.

The horses are entering into your vision, behind them are people, the horses are not saddled, but have bits in their dusty muzzles. One of the people raises an arm and so the horses and people stop.

Having looked directly at the horses, you see: those are the same noble horses that were gathered together a few days ago.

A man loudly bellows “We’re here!”

The rest of the men are silent. The horses whinny, but their tightened bits suppress their whinnies. The same man once again calls out, “Arms at the ready!”

The breeches of the rifles snap shut.

You shake your head (for you can now understand), the memory of the events of the previous days boils. But then “The horses have refused to be forbidden from whinnying.”

Hurriedly, fervently, you first offer an answer, “Yes, they’re noble.”

You are interrupted by the same husky voice, “But you didn’t afford them that right while we were in exile.”

A few people gather around you, similar to you – those who are unable to look truth in the eyes, wretches who are greedy for all the world’s clean air. You cross your raised arms and pledge to continue to deny the facts.

A nearby voice reaches you, responding to the first man, “The men are ready to carry out the task.”

You are looking around, surprisingly fast. The horses are standing in a row, on the edge of an abyss, blindfolded, wearing bridles, their faces turned towards

you, while yours faces the sky, there's a lump in your throat and a prayer in your eyes. This time the hollow voice simply asks: "Ready?" The men's voices come together as one...

At the very same moment, the man raises his hand in the air, you leave your hiding place, a rain of bullets pouring down, you're running and shrieking, the thoroughbred horses are tumbling towards the bottom of the abyss and disappearing there.

You're still screaming as you run towards the abyss, but people are blocking your way. You scream hysterically, they are surrounding you. They return without you.

* * *

A weed which smells of dew grows in your place, uniting the bright redness with the most delicate white.

Tall ears of corn have grown at the bottom of the gully. Upright and proud they defy the wind.

(Los Angeles, March 1984)

23 Abdul Sattar Nassir

4

Our Lord Caliph

The heat pours out of our bodies through our pores. It's winter, but you could boil potatoes and eggs over our bodies because the decisions which the caliph made oblige us to sweat during winter but to wear woollen clothes during the summer.

In addition, it is foreseen that our houses must be heated during July and August but then chilled in February. "Whoever breaks this regulation will be punished with floggings once a week for up to three years or sentenced to severe imprisonment which shall be spent in solitary confinement for a period of between six months and four years, or a fine to be paid in multiple instalments, corresponding to the severity of the act, and depending upon whether the act was committed with premeditation or due to negligence."

This is the text of the supplement to this year's Resolution No. 10, which was read out by the newsreader on the television while tears streamed out of her beautiful chestnut eyes, as though she herself was apologising to viewers for the grave misery which she had inflicted upon them.

In our city, full of debauchery and microbes, on our churned up streets out of which, just like steam, emanates the stench of rotting fish and the bodies of those tortured in prison, everything is forbidden to us. We, the sons of the city of happiness, weren't surprised in the slightest by these perverse and intangible rulings because ever since the time of Sultan Abdul Hamid we've grown accustomed to kissing our benefactors, cringing and crying out at the top of our voices "Long live our Lord!"

Our latest caliph was enthroned this year. We, the secret rebels, or the children of our witty neighbourhood, bestowed upon him the title of *the caliph of the television era*. There hasn't been any discontent in the caliphate ever since this world became saturated with films and revolutions and chockablock with planes and Jane Fonda.

But, all of the decrees which we carried out and all of the wishes which arrived one after the other, taking away our power to even breathe, were nothing compared with what we heard last night. We'd become reconciled with our Lord's desire that we cut off our long hair, and we laughed along with him while he was ripping up our tight-fitting breeches on the main streets; more still, we even lent him a hand when he painted our daughters' thighs³ in the universities and shops and beneath the Obelisk of Freedom, and we swallowed our spit when he put a tax on life in the homeland – forty fils on top of the basic price of a cinema ticket, on every trip to the coffeehouse or on the little boats which sail along the river, seven days in prison for everyone who smokes during Ramadan or who winks at a pretty woman, half a dinar for a costless happy thought (alongside the abolition of work bonuses and the prohibition of public wedding celebrations) – and we faked a smile when he abolished our freedom to love, to travel and to take a stiff drink above our graves.

And we applauded him for all of this so as to make life easier on ourselves, but the spiritual collapse which he germinated and which took root in us did not leave any place in our souls for us to be able to bear the monstrous ruling which shook our brains tonight. How, if only we knew, could we force ourselves to sweat during the bitter winters, or to shiver from cold in July!? How, for the love of God, can we pull on jumpers while the sun scorches us at the height of summer!? And on top of that – how can we use cooling appliances in the middle of winter when we live in rooms of only seven square metres in size?

* * *

Since the whole thing was more or less impossible, all of those living in poverty were carted off to prison, while those who were rich, along with their heirs and their employees, started to pay the fines, as well as all the women, of course, who resorted to selling their bodies for no other reason than to stay out of prison.

³ An allusion to the campaign of enforced haircuts for long haired young men and painting the legs of girls who dared to wear miniskirts on the streets during the early 1970s. The directive said that they should be painted with indelible paint, imported urgently from somewhere in Europe, from the bottom of the skirt downwards, just as each one of them deserved, but *self-organised groups of citizens* did this even more conscientiously, not skimping on the paint and without failing to colour the entire length of the girls' legs, all the way up to their hips. It is said that there were a number of cases where girls died on the spot, or not long after it happened, due to the vehemence of the humiliation and the fear.

* * *

We carved the words EVERYTHING IS FORBIDDEN into two potted walls blotted with black and pomegranate-coloured paint. We yelled in the streets and in cafés, obsessed by that murderous mystery, while it was actually the silence which was killing us – us, the angry protesters, the grandchildren of the great death which swept away one Julius Caesar and Muslim ibn Uqayl. Our slogan became embedded in our swollen veins even before we had finished writing it fully on those walls which met at an angle of ninety degrees.

However, the most wonderful amongst our dear friends were killed. The generation which came after us did not know what we had wanted to say in the remainder of the graffiti. Thinkers, painters and poets strived to discover its secret. Furthermore, they announced an alluring prize for anyone who knew the remainder of it – on the condition that it was substantiated by valid evidence. That generation, which had emerged in the company of Engelbert, Tom Jones and jazz instruments, was thoughtful and emotional to the very bottom of its heart and loved terribly its folkloric heritage, including all of the floggings, blood and violence. The interpreters, however, didn't know that this sentence did not have any sort of continuation – just that, there wasn't anything. In fact, there had been a half-witted revolutionary called Abdul Sattar Nassir and it was he who had lightly written it, then afterwards scratched out the plaster and mortar, and when it was no longer possible to patch it up and hide it, he received his punishment – that which, according to the rule, all anonymous wretches have received throughout the whole history of the world.

* * *

“We, the residents of the 32nd neighbourhood, the neighbourhood of All Arab Sovereigns, Romans' Avenue, the Hasuna nursery and the Shinawa orchards, beg our great caliph to protect our mothers and sisters from fornication and free them from the payment of the polltax. We also ask for mercy from our lord, that his people stop publicly flogging us in front of our spouses and loved ones, and we are in accord that this should be done in private so as to preserve our honour and reputations in front of them – may God grant the caliph long life and protect him from all evil.”

* * *

When the caliph rejected this appeal, our city turned into a first-class brothel, with pilgrimages being made here by tourists and those hungry for eastern wom-

en painted in the colours of legend and brown skin, while the women themselves nailed up their tariffs to their front doors:

Badriya, two dinars.

Nuayma, half a dinar.

The professional harlots who had practised harlotry at all times of pestilence, prosperity and woe, sometimes in public, other times in private, found themselves in a situation whereby their prices fell to two or three dirhams, and some were even giving it away for free. A weekly tax was paid to the state for these latter ones, and then, my friend, do whatever takes your fancy for two full months!

* * *

None of us could refuse anything.

It was strictly forbidden to be sad by the caliph's decree No. 105.b, which modifies Al-Hajjaj ibn Yusef's proverb which says, "Laugh a lot, so that you make us proud in front of the other nations".

The ban on being sad had precisely this aim – to preserve our image in the eyes of tourists. Crying and lamenting were also forbidden, as was saying one's farewells to the deceased, then the lamenting of those in love, the playing of songs by Fairuz, and a ban was introduced on the consumption of not just garlic and onions but thyme as well, so that even those with particularly sensitive eyes would stop crying.

We were burned by humiliation as we mandatorily enacted these impossible directives, but we even had to get used to them.

And that was that, you can now see faces locked in fake smiles, faces which don't laugh. They feel sorrow deep inside themselves, in the depths of their souls. There isn't a single sign of despondency on anyone's face. Equally, you can imagine how we cry without our tears; we've got used to a new life, reconciled ourselves to it and we are crowding into it just like sheep.

An old fashioned life within the framework of modern life – but everything from that life is forbidden by the order of our lord caliph.

* * *

We searched for easy deaths. This was just a dream which we nibbled on, in much the same way as we nibbled on seeds between our teeth.

What on earth happened to Hitler and that enigmatic companion of his who was always by his side!?

Which vein pulses in our city's rivers?

If only we could know the blood types of dead bodies, or of those who walk the main streets, so we could recognise that secret companion!

Is he in our city now?

People have explored the seas and oceans and deep rivers, crisscrossed mountains and valleys, combed through overgrown landscapes with sparse vegetation scattered here and there, they have ventured across deserts and to secret cities, held official and unmarked borders under surveillance, searched the house of my father and mother (even though they surely know that I was innocent) and the house belonging to my brother who emigrated to Austria, then the house of my friend who is now eating his macaroni in Naples, they even cut off all of the smuggling channels in Palestine, Vietnam and the north of Iraq, but they haven't found anything that would indicate that the companion of the first lord of war is there, in one of those regions.

Isn't it possible, therefore, like in hundreds of stories about the ancient wonders, that this hidden companion would be, let's say, the father of our new caliph, or that he is, in fact, the caliph himself, after he learned Arabic in seven days without a teacher? Or that it is any one of his closest associates? So that he is his eternal incubus who dictates to him all of those ungodly acts?

If that sort of thing isn't possible, how then do we carry these burns and swastika signs in our flesh ? I personally saw (I wasn't dreaming, nor did I just imagine it, or lie, neither am I a spy) a Nazi swastika – the one belonging to the National Socialist Party of Germany – on our caliph's chest, on the side where his heart is, while he was prowling the streets during one of his daily monitoring trips in his car which has the registration plate 1.

"Travel to enemy countries has been banned, as well as going to European and other Arab countries."

And thus something like a crown of thorns was wrapped around our city, laid behind the perimeter walls which the police erected. To prevent us from leaving to other countries, they constructed barracks, built prison camps and surrounded us with bunkers dug into the earth, filled with rifles and machine guns. They capture women (named by the caliph) for the amusement of the most loyal soldiers, who spend all their time at the city's border.

Somebody secretly put up dark red posters around the town with the slogan "Lovers of the 20th century unite!"

Immediately after this, one hundred educated young men were executed, and when it was repeated another two times, a special night police appeared who checked people's identities and carried out interrogations, detaining them as they wished and releasing them, likewise, as they wished.

* * *

Houses were full of wretches who were hiding either out of fear of taxation or to escape from mobilisation, or, more still, from the police truncheons and scissors, but most of them from wide-eyed hunger. It became difficult to make people obedient even by threatening them with death especially since several utterly frightening decisions just echoed through the rooms of the caliphate's Council.

Just like a gust of fresh wind, a human roar began which simply wiped out a whole part of the city. People rose up against the decrees and directives which had been piling up for month after month, one of which would also introduce a ban on writing on the walls in public toilets. Since the caliph's wicked people could not find out who was writing all of these poisonous slogans, the caliph composed an amendment to a previous decree. This provided for the removal of toilet doors in all parts of the capital city. He only left the doors on ladies toilets since he personally made sure that the walls there were clean and the toilets empty – with the exception of the sanitary pads and tissues.

However, a surprise awaited our caliph. On the day which followed the night during which they hanged the citizen Abdul Sattar Nassir, slogans were found scratched into the walls of women's toilets as well. This happened when many good people, who had been promising an uprising, despite living in the harshest of conditions, cloaked themselves in women's black abayas⁴ and rushed into the toilets in girls'

⁴ Wide, black cloaks Muslim women in the Middle East cover themselves with when leaving home, particularly hiding their hair, forehead and the majority of their face.

schools and other places under the jurisdiction of the fairer sex in order to write down all of their souls' torment, pain and cries.

* * *

I can't say exactly how, why or where they came from, but two wax figures were placed in front of the caliph's court. One of them was of Noske, the head of Hitler's butchers and a member of the Reichstag, a hero of Berlin's Bloody Sunday, and the other was the Marquis de Sade, the crème de la crème of sexual perverts and leader of the Movement for the Corruption of the Soul, which had taken hold of London and the nations of Western Europe a long time ago.

I don't know how the caliph got hold of the originals of these two figures, who it was that brought them to his attention or how the presence of two of the most wicked men in the whole wide world rested with the souls of the members of the Crown Council, and I'm especially unsure of why he opted for those two in particular, given that they've been dead so long that every trace of them had vanished from human memory.

Whatever answer I come up with, all I can do is laugh, and likewise all I could do is laugh at all of the answers which any of my more level-headed friends managed to come up with. Whenever I read any book about the war and other atrocities (no matter how much William Shirer and Colin Wilson chatter about forgotten events), I just see myself laughing, because my country, for whose agony I shed tears, is as far off as only it can be, in mind, in spirit, geographically and culturally, from both Noske, the butcher from the Nazis' Ministry of War, and de Sade, the lover of blood and carnality.

Even the caliph himself doesn't know the answer to this (he said as much in passing on one occasion).

Nevertheless, he loved those two sculptures. He raised them up on plaster pedestals so as to remind, as he put it, tourists, governmental delegations, athletes, Arab intellectuals and Orientalists that we are a nation which had lost itself, which was killing its prophets and was burying its daughters alive, which had renounced its glory and castrated its most valuable men. This is a nation which is waiting for death, just after seeing its name wiped off the world map, and written in another script, as the name of another tribe, which we had hated and, laughing, had wanted to chuck into the sea.

* * *

Sorrow has paralysed my veins while I have endured the pain which is killing my nation. I did not know who to blame for this painful ordeal, so as to bring a sense of closure to this bloody atrocity. Journalism, in whose home I had found a refuge, had a mouth clogged with luxury, myth and threats. Thinkers, who visited us for regular annual congresses, stayed in five star hotels and, after their aperitifs and dinner, applauded declamations brimming with empty rhymes, only to finally go back to where they came from in comfortable Pan American planes.

* * *

In June, just like stelae carved in cuneiform script, protest banners were put up in our neighbourhood. With them arrived black clouds of cries full of a charge which the heart does not know nor understand.

For our lord, this was like an event from the tales: sheer frivolity, impudence, harlotry, even – an event that was impossible *per se*. Before he had even asked what sort of exclamations these were, he rolled out his armed police with their scissors and those excellently scented permanent Italian paints, and after that sent his soldiers, armed to the teeth with firearms, water cannons and crates of rock sand.⁵ A load of naked women were released behind the police and soldiers, with the task of drawing the attention of the protesters to their bodies. It was at this point that our lord caliph's procession appeared, full of women and champagne, page boys and slaves and, finally, came the order that the rioters be killed and dispersed using two almighty water cannons, which lashed at the faces of the alarmed youths just like a cyclone.

Despite these scenes of quick deaths, desperate screams and humiliation, the caliph carefully listened to a man who, bellowing above us, gave an outpouring of all of his life's despair: "Down with that bloated gut! Down with the unfair taxes! Death to the vermin! Banish the caliph! Beat them! We were lazy and stagnant! Charge, don't fear the police's knives! Heads up and die all at once, my wonderful friends!"

Laughing, in amongst his page boys and nude women, the caliph quietly asked, "What's that handsome boy saying?"

⁵ A sort of stone dust which is discharged under pressure with the aid of special pumps as the most effective means in the fight against protesters. Its use, according to the writer's claims, is forbidden under international conventions, since it can cause temporary, and sometimes permanent, blindness.

He then offered him a deal, to none other than the very person who had called us to revolt!

He presented him with the opportunity to come over to his side and be one of his confidants.

* * *

For all of our city's pain and misery, the leader, who had lead us in the demonstrations against the caliph (against that which he himself had termed despotism and clan rule), withdrew his mighty self, with his broad nose, and indeed defected to our lord caliph, for which he was appointed as governor of the south of our beloved fatherland.⁶

Our last hope disappeared with him and I felt remorse, conscious that it had only seemed as though there was honesty and purity at all of those secret meetings of ours.

* * *

After the uprising and terrible riots which followed, one thing changed in our country. The caliph's prisons grew rapidly in number and they were bedecked with frightful, old fashioned devices for torturing all of those who had participated in the demonstrations. The demonstrations were subsequently called *the great defeat*, because the failure was the last station at which we stopped. We were burnt by the humiliation and disheartened, while the blood which was upon us dried slowly and in silence. We all found ourselves in prison, where we had the chance to read a letter by our dearest friend, who wrote down a chronicle of our city in these simple words: "Oh, my country, oh, the country of those who die without a voice, I bid you now farewell. The caliph, lord of us all, has ordered that with my head I redeem all of the prisoners from the civil war which we lost. I have signed it, I agree to it, because with all the strength of my body and mind I consider it to be for nothing, my dear country, and I will die in public, just me, so that my darling can be proud every time she celebrates my birthday."

Baghdad, 1974.

⁶An allusion to a well known individual from the Iraqi political scene of the time.

5

*Hasan Ajami's Coffeehouse*⁷

Harun al-Rashid Street, dry soil and hot concrete despite the cold Mughal times.⁸ There are no women in the vicinity of places of worship, so the alleys are in search of the memories sleeping behind the winding Hasan Pasha Crescent.⁹ This pasha no longer had anything new and so fell straight into the arms of Rabbah Nouri, who was the only one able to escape before the Mughal army and find refuge in that coffeehouse, having given himself another name so that the guardsmen would not expose his gums and reveal the tattooed number to the Only Ruler.¹⁰

⁷ Like hundreds of other stories and poems written in the last two and a half decades, this story was first read in this very same coffeehouse. The sharp satirical and humorous allusions, only fully understandable to members of Baghdad's literary community since they are formed around "familiarisms", were rewarded with applause and salvos of laughter, and word of them travelled throughout the whole town on the very same night, just like a whirlwind.

⁸ The expression *Mughal times* is a sorrowful allusion to the more recent times of war, revolution, persecution and courts-martial, against which the massacres committed by Hulagu Khan's army in 1258 should be understood as being "cold". This popular oxymoron was conceived by the main hero of the story and owner of the coffeehouse, the moustachioed Rabbah Nouri, alias Hasan Ajami.

⁹ Islamic law does not forbid the admission of women into places of worship; however, they practically never enter because they are not allowed to pray together with men. Tradition deprives them of entry into coffeehouses. Coffeehouse Hasan Ajami's is impudently nicknamed *the poets' place of worship*: it is located within easy reach of the Abbasid mosques and in the middle of a neighbourhood full of tea and coffeehouses, those most holy temples of male repose, but, under the noses of abhorred protectors of tradition, women can also freely enter – journalists, poets, actresses. And Rabbah Nouri, who was born in Palestine during the Turkish rule and who sought asylum in Baghdad in the twenties, is the only one still keeping and retelling his memories of the interesting events which took place in the loop of those ancient streets, where smugglers, prostitutes and lute manufacturers used to reside, the streets such as New Hasan Pasha Road which "embraces" this coffeehouse – from behind.

¹⁰ Successfully escaping countless mobilisations, during a border crisis with Iran, Rabbah Nouri became famous after saying that if new praetorians would also hunt him down to the borderland, he would get out of it using the logic of pushing

From this moment onwards, the coffeehouse began to bear his false and defiant name: Hasan Ajami.

* * *

He was present when the Jews were sneaking in after three thousand years and when they were burning the Holy Scripture, offloading all the sin onto the Muslim armies.¹¹ A game, but one from which they gained the best migration in the history of their ancient proverb which says: *Keep what is bequeathed to you and thus you'll live a better life.*

Rabbah Nouri didn't have anything to keep, though – he just had to make sure that his losses didn't increase. He feared that a certain and terrible death would befall his company, in case that the Jews again sought amends for the theft of their religions, reasoning that whoever sets fire to the sacred is also able to set fire to the innocent. Or, as Ezer Weizman said in one of his speeches, “We know best of all that life is a joke, but we shan't laugh until we rid ourselves of every last Muslim who sleeps in the countries of Syria and Mesopotamia.”

Ever since those nights, Rabbah Nouri began to discover the game of dominoes, using it to try to trick the *occupiers* and gain some time from them, while at the same time *the armies of his country*¹² would be working on limiting accidents and preventing bankruptcy, thus protecting the rest of the population from starvation, homelessness and the need to flee.

And so, in November, in the year of petrifying fear,¹³ Rabbah Nouri purchased this coffeehouse and bestowed upon it his newly conceived, false name and, day by day, it grew to be regarded amongst the most famous coffeehouses in

a finger into the eye of the authorities - by introducing himself falsely as Hasan Ajami - *the Beautiful Persian!* The numbers on gums refer to the technique of branding livestock whilst serving the army, which is a sharp allusion to the treatment of citizens.

¹¹ This is an allusion to the mass immigration of Jews to Palestine after the First World War, during the Arabs' struggle for freedom from colonial powers when, to justify “ethnic cleansing”, two quarrelling brotherly sides each accused the other of demonstrative burnings of the Christian Bible, in their attempts to gain the backing of public opinion in the West.

¹² i.e. poetic louts who never leave the coffeehouse, for whose sake Nouri gives himself over to time-wasting; “the armies of his country” refers to his relative-appointees, also refugees.

¹³ This is a reference to the “revolution” of 1968.

the city. Moreover, high ranking officers, the most beautiful fortunetellers all set foot there, as well as lunatics, especially since he imported great samovars from distant Khorramshahr and decorated the walls with giant mirrors which had been stolen from the maharaja Najiya Burhuman's house.¹⁴ Indian tea became one of the most enticing lures to *Hasan Ajami's Coffeehouse* and, despite one glass of it costing a full five fils, the clientèle kept coming from dawn all the way through to midnight.

Dozens of clairvoyants and hundreds of singers came to the coffeehouse, and it was also visited by one king and nine ministers. From its very first day, pictures of famous people were put up on its thick walls,¹⁵ and so one could see a picture of the great Aleppo poet Munzir al-Sayyid al-Hurr,¹⁶ alongside the resplendent and learned sage Khaled al-Mutlaq¹⁷ who had gone by foot from the banks of the Sava to Ankara, and from there all the way to Baghdad; he covered this distance in half a year, awaiting the magical moment when he would set foot in the coffeehouse which had become one of the wonders of the world. And even if the learned sage could not comprehend what compelled people to fiddle with those little domino tiles, he nevertheless loved their clamour and squealing, which resembled that off contorted fishwives.

Rabbah Nouri moves between the customers like a bean, thin, as though there wasn't a single pair of trousers in the whole world which would fit him; but, just like a pasha, he is very respected, feared by both fools and geniuses, while both the young and the old battle for his favour, all in fear of his power; were he to lose his temper with any of them, then that particular individual no longer had any hope of coming back again for one of those sweet Indian teas which burn the tongue.

¹⁴ The poet Naji Ibrahim reimbursed the owner with these mirrors for the debt which he had amassed over the course of a year by drinking tea every day and never once paying for it.

¹⁵ The coffeehouse has preserved its ancient appearance and so is presented to foreign guests as a tourist attraction. In contrary to Islamic tradition which forbids the pictorial representation of living creatures, the walls are decorated not only with gaudy motifs depicting Bedouin life, but also portraits of poets and even Christian icons. However, it lacks the one picture which, as is prescribed by law, must be displayed in every public place – with the exception of an unclear and overlooked print on buffalo skin.

¹⁶ The anarchist poet who studied in Aleppo, his surname means *free*.

¹⁷ The poet whose surname means *liberated*. Returning from Germany where he had briefly studied philosophy, he was robbed in Belgrade and had to return home by hitchhiking and was held in custody in Ankara.

At around midday the coffeehouse falls into a drowsiness. A sip here, a loss there. This is the time when Hasan Ajami enters into his guests' secrets. He wants to know everything about each of the customers who come into his coffeehouse, and, wants to remain the only one who is unknown to everyone. How did they find out about the famine which lasted for three years in the age of the prophet David? And furthermore, where did they find the money to go to the houses of sin which, five hundred yards from the coffeehouse, were welcoming their guests at a time when Maidan was still a lake full of fish and an island of thighs?¹⁸

Only he, Rabbah Nouri, or, should we say, Hasan Ajami – for there's no difference – gets into all of their secrets. He is the muezzin whose voice they listen to, in five daily prayers, from the mosque which rests within reach of the coffeehouse, he is the same one who sells cigarettes, for wholesale and retail, when the dealers in al-Saray souq don't expect it, and he's also the one (he and nobody else) who deceived a great many of the coffeehouses aces (or they deceived him), by selling them his most beautiful verses for the price of dust, so many excellent poems bore their names, while his first name¹⁹ travels in the grip of the past so that nothing is left of him apart from miserable skin over miserable bones.

* * *

The *beast* has five heads, but *kings* only have one sword, while *Judas* doesn't need anything other than a *kiss on the lips* and for him the story is finished.²⁰ But, Rabbah Nouri took stock of the coffeehouse – and it took it out of him – with false kisses. Husein ibn Hasan learned to play dominoes from him, but afterwards denied – in front of him personally – whom he had learned it from.²¹ He, in truth, was the only *professor* to all of them, but what was funny in all of this was that it was no longer funny, ever since even Mansur ibn Abdel Nasser began to passionately move around those wooden dominoes, in just the same way as his peers, the traders and sellers of expensive books, did. Yes, even that beautiful miser

¹⁸ The nearby square, at one time densely packed with public institutions which had red lanterns in the windows.

¹⁹ Rabbah - The One Who Earns. The Acquirer; but glory is acquired by those who publish his wit as their own verses and aphorisms.

²⁰ *Beast, kings, Judas, kiss on the lips* – all are Baghdad terms used in dominoes.

²¹ Ibn Hasan means *Hasan's son*; a joke at the expense of the poet and translator Al-Husein Hasan (whose father, therefore, really was called Hasan, like Ajami as well) who persistently denied that it was Nouri, alias Hasan, that whom there is no weaker player, who had "fathered" him in the game of dominoes.

who was called a lover of cigarettes behind his back!²² And so what then was left for Ajami (that same Hasan) who had squandered away the whole of his life – so as to conceal his real name, in fear of Mughal armies and Jewish conspiracies!?

Indeed, the story has gone unnoticed by historians, and the name of Rabbah Nouri has fallen into the thick dusts which amass beneath the pillars on Rashid Street. It would no longer be by any means easy to reduce his punishment, were the police to find out that the owner of this coffeehouse does not possess any type of documentation.²³ Worse still, he did not have an identity card with a stamp from the registrar's office. And so what would happen if his pals were to *head off* and if the poet Kemal al-Abdali²⁴ settled all of his debts, or if the Russian scholar Malkov al-Muttalibi²⁵ stopped drinking Indian tea?! And what would he do with all of that excess of wanton time which he would have to spend without his clientèle, without the famous personalities and ministers and singers and poets and chiromancers, and without pimps, those who secretly – for a back-hander of no more than two dirhams – give him the dominoes' very last secrets so that he could then *kill Mr. Double Deuce*,²⁶ without fluttering his eyelashes or forming a smile with his moustache at the moment when he kills him – so that his adversaries would not see through his scheme until the end of the game.

* * *

The moment when the Beautiful Persian disappeared from the coffeehouse in the blink of an eye and when it appeared as though it would retain nothing but his name, that was a moment of great sorrow, indeed. This was the moment when Khalileo Leo,²⁷ high representative of the Only Ruler's regime, burst into the cof-

²² A publisher and bookseller, a great admirer of the former Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser (from whence he got his nickname Ibn Abdel Nasser – *Nasser's son*), he is well known for putting his cigarettes away in his pocket, and is an inseparable companion to poets and writers.

²³ Rabbah Nouri was never recorded in the book of citizens in his new homeland, just as in the same respect he never had either Palestinian or Syrian citizenship, nor a birth certificate from the Ottoman Empire, so much so that it would be possible to doubt whether such a person had ever even existed. But he is alive to this very day.

²⁴ The poet who eternally borrowed small sums of money from Nouri because others would no longer give him anything.

²⁵ With an MA from Moscow and a doctorate in literature from Cairo, one of the most respected Iraqi literary critics.

²⁶ A sacrificial move in dominoes by which a player acquires an additional point.

²⁷ At the time of this story's central event, the deputy chief at the police station on

feehouse and, from the door, pointing with his crippled claws at the guests, shouted in a hoarse and frightful voice: “Everyone! Whoever came to the coffeehouse to drink Indian tea and smoke narghiles can stay – he may enjoy himself here at any time; but for whomever wants to ruin himself with this unlawfulness which they call dominoes, the Only Ruler, lord of all of us, has decreed that he be sentenced to four years hard labour, alongside the reading of all the poems by the poet Clatterbore, until he loses his mind and kills himself with his own bare hands. We don’t love the politics of dominoes and will forbid it by force – if necessary, of course.”

Sudden silence fell over the settees in the coffeehouse and over the glow of cigarettes. Moreover, a quiet came over all of the throats and all of the dishdashas,²⁸ and half of the clientèle snuck outside, thanking God that they still had time to save themselves. Those who had won money left it and fled just like those who hadn’t, a poet and a little poet fled, while not a living soul remained inside, apart from the pictures of famous people, who stupidly grinned down at a time which does not look like a time and at the deserted coffeehouse. There was no difference now between this and all of the other coffeehouses, apart from the name.

The servant fled and the lord fled; the prince escaped, and the beggar, too, silent files trudging dutifully and painfully, everyone paying for their Indian tea and not asking for their change. *Amdi Muli*²⁹ left, cooling his charming bald head with a fan, after him snuck out Mr *Ordi*,³⁰ after he had stopped looking into his palm, neither of the two of them glancing back at the narghiles which continued to glow by the walls of the coffeehouse. And nothing was left, other than the smoke.

But entirely alone, Rabbah Nouri confronted the High Representative, looked him directly in the eye and, before he could extend a finger to alert the Only

Rashid Streed was called Halil al-Asad (=lion). On this occasion, Rabbah Nouri opposed the decision by the authorities to ban “gambling” games in coffeehouses, informing the great autocrat that he would not be abiding by this order and, although he did not otherwise gamble, he challenged him publicly to a domino-duel, offering his life as collateral for the game. His courageous protest caused a *domino effect* throughout the whole capital: the ban was not implemented.

²⁸ A long male robe, traditional Arab dress.

²⁹ Watercolourist and writer of prosaic miniatures, Hamdi Muhlif, hero of the story *He Who Was Born Twice*, lost his teeth due to scurvy in an Iranian prison camp and thus acquired a speech impediment whereby he incorrectly pronounced even his own name.

³⁰ TV director who lost at dominoes and backgammon every day, he has acquired the nickname *Ordi* because he uses this Turkish word for the wooden armies which he leads.

Ruler – pictured upon a tiger’s skin – that he would rip him to shreds in front of the masses, he said in a deep, fiery and forceful voice, entirely out of keeping with his scrawny body, “Go to your Only Lord and tell him what I’m going to tell you now! The coffeehouse, by that I mean *this* coffeehouse, has nothing to do with some people winning and other people losing; it’s just a little place where we attempt to live, because we’ve already lost everything: family, love, the city, literature, the river, dinars. Tell him, so help you God, that the Mughals left us well-off here, and so did the Jews. If he needs to come to see us – he’s welcome a thousand times! I promise you and swear to you that, were he to consider playing dominoes with me, Mr Double Deuce (you here are all my witnesses!) will drop dead before the blink of an eye. And tell him this too, High Representative, that we love this game here just as the customers at Parliament³¹ also loved it for hundreds of years. But he shut that coffeehouse, despite that, before their innocent hearts. And inform him yet tonight, before it’s too late (God be with you!), that dominoes are actually just empty conversations, but they’re the only conversations which suit these loathsome days, so, bearing this in mind – what does your Great Lord want from us here!?”

* * *

At this moment – at no other time but just at that miraculous point in time, I mean to say, time which had been grabbed by the collar – Harun al-Rashid Street smelled of sprouting soil and cool concrete. Nobody knows how many women came out of their houses and headed towards the coffeehouse, nor how, nor why; nor who was the first to lift the thin, all too thin, Mr. Rabbah Nouri up onto the shoulders of hundreds of people who brought him forward from a corner of the coffeehouse and set off, carrying him thus, through places of worship and houses and the miserable kiosks selling old books, announcing with a sense of love mixing with the white flour which was drifting in the air, having fallen from the rooftops:

You saved us, Rabbah, our dominoes,

How much we love you, God only knows!

³¹ A once famous coffeehouse named Parliament was located about a dozen metres away from Ajami’s place. Since the middle of the last century, poets and artists gathered there, but at the end of the 1960s, under an order issued by the highest revolutionary authorities, literally overnight, it was transformed into some sort of fastfood restaurant. The following morning, the artists occupied Hasan Ajami’s Coffeehouse en masse.

Who on earth had told them that this man, who had born the nickname *Mister Hasan Ajami* ever since Mughal times, was, in fact, called Rabbah Nouri!?

And that's not so important, the important thing is what happened one day after that, when the Only Ruler came through the door of the coffeehouse and asked for the owner. Just as he stretched out his right arm, decorated in diamonds and rings, to shake hands with him, he had already become one of the most notable guests, and the first to even insist that "Mr Double Deuce" should be killed at Rabbah Nouri's. Perhaps the most beautiful thing was that the Only Ruler had wished – even many hundreds of years ago – to personally request that his picture also be hung on the wall of the coffeehouse, alongside the notable writers and poets and singers and angels and great winners. And what was even more beautiful than all of this was that Rabbah Nouri – with courage worthy of pity – never did so. He never hung a picture of the Only Lord on the coffeehouse's wall. The reason for this was very simple: he bet on this in a game of dominoes, having the Great Ruler in front of him personally, and the bet was that he would lose his life if he lost the game, or put up the picture where the Only Ruler wants it – of course, if the Ruler should win.

* * *

Therefore:

It's truly a disgrace that people today say (however much some strive and however unruly, stupid, flippant and bold they might be) that Rabbah Nouri is just spoken of as being a player like all of the rest of them, who would one time lose and another time win; to wager one's life is not just a game! By God, to talk such nonsense is a huge disgrace and, if anybody should say such a thing, Rabbah Nouri would have every right "to kill Mr Double Deuce" and fiercely strike the table, and maybe, really, burst into tears, too. Maybe he would actually burst into tears – he'd have the right to cry over Mughal times – he, that wonderful, thin hungry man, he, who defeated himself twice, but despite his bold and painful win, never told anybody about it.

17 September 1995.

6

The City of Silence

Having left his noisy city, full of all sorts of sounds, and having arrived in another one, he looked for another creature with whom he could exchange a few words. But he couldn't find anybody who would even move their lips. He watched how the people went about their business in silence and walked along the streets mechanically. Nobody spoke to anybody else. Nobody looked at anybody else. It seemed to him as though he was in a doll museum or a temple full of statues. This filled him with fear and he was not far from giving in to the thought that he return to his own city, the one from which he had just fled. And he would have done this if he hadn't been so sure of what kind of punishment awaited him there, since he had cursed the people who make all of that noise, hubbub and tumult.

He turned to aimless wandering through the streets of the new town. He gazed at the people and their movements, at the perfect silence which ruled over the whole place. All of a sudden the city looked to him just like an ancient cemetery whose dead were mixed with the earth and sand, while their souls flew into the unknown. He did not manage to meet any lips which move, nor did he have the chance to hear a human (or even a non-human) voice. The whole town was working, but there was absolutely no noise, shouting or fracas whatsoever. He called out to passers-by, begged, but could not induce a single movement upon any of those lips.

He thought about the possible causes of this strange and bleak phenomenon – a phenomenon which, day after day, made him more and more upset and worried. He could not make sense of it or interpret its symbols, he was not able to penetrate its secrets. He walked alone, slowly, not letting out the smallest sound, not even to speak to himself out loud. And nobody paid any attention to his presence there whatsoever.

All of this caused him some sort of creepy feeling which was just as pitiful and painful as the one which he had felt due to the noise and din in the town from which he had come. He began to think about escaping to some other town, one which wasn't ruled over either by this kind of eternal silence or that insufferable human clatter which had driven him to desperation.

But he soon realised that he couldn't leave this city: whoever comes here, stays here, forever and ever – that was what he read on the panel above the main gate at the city's exit. This entirely alarmed him and so he asked himself, "Well how could I have even found this gate then?" Not a single voice answered his question. Instead, at the very same moment, words appeared to him: "The gate exists for the dead leave through it – and those who speak."

He gritted his teeth and tried his damndest not to commit the sin of speaking. But he still sought to uncover the reason for this silence, just as he knew the reasons for the yelling, hurly-burly and tumult in his first town, to which he would prefer hell itself, if only he could have chosen between life and death.

He asked himself, in his head, what was to be done. The words "Work in silence" appeared upon the glass panel. He approached one of the counters and took a hand-out with instructions on what to do when, being dead, so as not to be thrown out of the town. This already looked to him like a complete nightmare, deaf and dumb and petrified, without a breath of wind or a single cloud in the sky. It even seemed to him as though the residents were just walking in place.

Not having found a clear answer, he was ready to burst into tears – if only he hadn't been afraid that he might utter something. Setting off for work he read on a stone tablet: "What's the point of speech, young man?" An old man, at least one hundred years old, looked at him with a sense of pity. At the same moment, new words appeared on the tablet: "All speech did was reveal my weaknesses to me. I spoke for half a century, and the only thing that forced me towards it was ignorance. But now – what would I speak about? What do I know that I could tell you that I know!? Yes, young man, I'm now hiding my ignorance. But whenever I learn, I learn for you. Once I was the subject of ridicule and sneers. And you, if you wish to seize the path to your happiness, then grasp the path of your ignorance – know that you don't know much more than you think, see, hear and write down. But, young man, I fear for you, I fear that you will speak. Many centuries ago the residents of this city learned that what you know is not what you wish you knew, that this is not knowledge which is rooted in knowledge."

Tears began to flow from his eyes, but he didn't allow himself to make any sort of sound worthy of mention. He then read the old man's subsequent words upon the stone tablet: "You will see that all of us here are embarrassed to say that we know – we find such a statement to be a disgrace. Whoever says he knows is actually rotting in ignorance. Man is not born to know. Imagination is that which gives him the pleasant feeling that he possesses a key and that he has passed through the doorway of knowledge."

He almost passed out from the crippling grief. He wanted to leave this town and return to his own one, the one in which people know the wisdom of silence and the wisdom of observation. However, at the exit door he once again read: "The door exists for the dead. And for those who speak."

He was silent, feeling the magnitude of life, whose strength intoxicatingly coursed through his being. However, he could not manage to hold back the tears and crouched for a long time in the park, in silence, rejecting with difficulty the desire to strike up a conversation even with a tree, or even a rock. At that moment, he read on the tablet on the other side of the street: "What use is speaking when you are lost in misapprehension? Will misapprehension be misapprehension's guide?" He rapidly read the words which passed across the panel: "This town has survived periods of great suffering and has seen the monstrosities of war, insanity and decay. Then the sages pledged to bring an end to these afflictions and failures. After many discussions they discovered the secret – a secret which is in every one of us: the illusion of cognition and all of knowledge's vanity. They decided to implement a law by which agreements and conversations would be reduced to individual words, instead of speech in sentences. The next phase would be silence and the solving of problems by the heart speaking. For instance, I can now hear you and know what's going on in your head, full of turmoil, babbling, yelling and loud noises. But you have already, in fact, opted for the proper solution. You left your ignorance so as to learn that you are actually a greater ignoramus than you had pretended to yourself and had ever believed. We know one another here without the aid of books or lie detectors. For as long as you think correctly, you won't have any need for illusions. Now you say to yourself: is that all it is?, well, I say to you: yes and no! Because the cessation of shouting is similar to the cessation of silence: on the scales those two are equal. But, young man, you're not the one who possesses the power to understand that. You need yet to begin to understand your own limits. And the more you shelter behind silence, the less you will threaten

43

the limits of others. Because you are *you* and he is *he*. And you both have your places. But he who understands his place will no longer have a need for a place. Now go to work. And understand that silence is just one of the beautiful forms of speech.”

He rejoiced at this speech – so much so that he began to lose consciousness and, in a moment, let out a sound of outrageous rapture and blissfulness. At the same moment he awoke in the middle of his original town, while people swarmed around him, murmuring and shouting: “He speaks! He speaks! He speaks!”

But he didn’t say anything. Understanding that he couldn’t return to the city of silence, desperate, he closed his mouth and never spoke again till his dying day. His funeral was accompanied by the loudest sounds which scattered the atoms of his silence into the universal ocean which includes all sounds. It was only then that he understood the uselessness of silence and the uselessness of speech and that, upon the scales, these two weigh just the same.

7

The Blizzard

Time: 1 January 1996

Place: Any place in the world suitable for a tragedy.

Wait a moment while I just catch my breath, why're you in such a hurry anyway? Besides, I don't want anything right now, I'll wait for him, he said that he'd come at ten o'clock. What time is it now? Five to ten? So he'll come soon, just give me a coffee. I'll pay, believe me when I tell you. Look, this is his letter, it arrived yesterday, and it was his choice to meet here, as it's always been till now. You can definitely remember him, can't you? The handsome one, with chestnut hair and honey-coloured eyes. Well, his hair isn't chestnut-coloured anymore – the wars have painted it the colour of snow. Tell me honestly, my good waiter – do I look beautiful? I put a lot of effort into looking good, don't I look pretty? And this dress, does it suit me? Look at it carefully. What? The colour? But you haven't got any taste, I'm stupid for even asking you what you think about something which is hard for you to understand. What time is it now? A quarter past ten? Never mind, you know how many things can happen to a man on the road. What have you got today? I want an excellent lunch, a lunch which fits the occasion when he is coming back, I think that you're well acquainted with his tastes when it comes to food. Listen to what it says in the letter – but no, I can't be revealing our secrets to strangers! You understand where I'm coming from, of course, so go and fetch me a menu now, I want to have a look at what sort of a selection you've got. But wait actually, it's better if we let him choose, what time is it now? Half past ten? His car must have broken down, but he'll come, what do you think? What's up with you? I can see that you've gone a bit pale in the face, as though you're overcome by some sort of deep sorrow – has something bad happened to you? How's your wife? Are you not getting her letters? Don't despair,

when despair gets a grip on a person then there's nothing that can be done, so be patient – there's nothing else to be done, just be patient! There, you see this letter, how long I had to wait for the postman to hand it to me! If we were close friends then I'd read it to you now, you understand, yes? It'd be awful if you didn't understand what I'm talking about – hey, what's the time now? Already eleven!?... I forgot, I think he actually said at eleven o'clock – exactly, we need to meet at eleven! Sometimes joy gets us into such a state that we end up forgetting things – but where's that coffee got to!? By the way, the service here isn't what it used to be, I don't know why you're acting like this towards me? What's up with your eyes? Have you been crying? There's nothing in life worth crying about – take me, for example, have you ever seen me crying? And why? Here, the letter finally arrived and in it he confirmed to me that... No, no, it's actually a very personal letter, I'm sorry – what time is it? Twenty past eleven? Are you sure that your watch is right? Just a moment, please, I think that I was mistaken when I said that we need to meet at ten o'clock in the morning. Oh, now I've remembered! Yes, it was meant to be ten in the evening, of course, I'd better get going now and come back this evening. Do reserve this table for us and please take care of dinner, too – but where is that coffee? Why are you so negligent when I'm your only guest!? And why on earth am I the only guest? Is it because of the blizzard maybe? I've no idea why people are so afraid of snowstorms and rain. Listen, you know how wonderful that is – they talk to you about... about... what I actually want to say is... in a nutshell, I fall into a depression when the wind doesn't blow and when the rain doesn't soak the cracked earth. Life just looks so pointless and unbearable without storms, they're the music of happy and far-off times, do you get what I'm trying to say? I think that you agree with me and that makes it easier for us. People who think in the same way can see so many wonderful sides to life! I need to get going now, pass on my regards to the restaurant's manager and thank him for me for these decorations which you've put up on the walls, it's a really beautiful welcome for such a hero, but – wait, it seems that the date you wrote on the window is wrong, you realise? Be careful, do you realise what a terrible violation against time it is if you write a greeting card for 1996? Maybe you've got some sort of time machine? Ha-ha-ha! Besides, we've got more than enough time to reach 1996 – we'll go through a lot more wars until that year!... Listen, forget the coffee. I'm going immediately. Oh, yes, I forgot to tell you an important thing: put the silver candlestick with three coloured candles on our table tonight! Why three? What's that got to do with you? Those are our secrets which we don't reveal to strangers. And don't

forget the white carnations – whatever you do, don't mess it up and use red ones: everything that's red immediately reminds him of blood and those who perished.

* * *

With unsteady steps, the woman moved between the low wooden tables, having moved towards the restaurant's door. She cast a sneering glance in the direction of the new year's slogans which were hung on the outside and then disappeared behind the corner. The wind kept on toying with the branches of the naked tree. The rain had stopped and great big snowflakes fell heavily, sketching lines across the sloping curbs. The letter remained upon the table where the woman had been sitting, with a date from February 1991 and the postmark "Sector Basra Front".

47 Zakariyya Tamir

7

The House of Many Chambers

-Deception-

Entirely by chance, the Lord of the Land saw a film on television in which a beautiful, milky-white, blonde haired woman acted, and so he called out to his servants, "I want that woman!"

His servants – who were themselves all ministers, generals, millionaires, poets, journalists and old men with long, dignified beards – went pale and informed him that this particular woman had already been dead for two years, after having committed suicide. He responded angrily and sternly, "I don't want to listen to any sort of excuses and I don't care how much money it costs!"

The servants hurried to get in touch with the most famous and competent intermediaries, who themselves then got to work. Day and night, they carried out long and tiresome negotiations in heaven and hell, and in many of the world's capital cities as well. When this was successfully completed (with the payment of enormous sums of money), the pale, blonde haired beauty was given leave for a period of seven days on the condition of spending them in the Lord of the Land's bed. But she stayed there for just a single night because the breath from her mouth was unbearable and her flesh was cold like the flesh of a corpse, devoid of everything that excites. And so she was returned the very next day to the place from whence she had come, and the Lord of the Land remained moody for many days, having attempted to forget the wicked illusion to which he had succumbed and which was hard to forget.

-It'll Be As You Wish-

The Only Lord of the Land called his Minister of Information to tell him in a strict voice, "I called you just to remind you of your duties as Minister of Information"

and to warn you that I know about everything you're up to, I even know what you're thinking!"

The Minister of Information said, "There is nobody who would dare to say that you are not a great connoisseur of all and everything."

The Lord said, "You embezzled a load of money which has driven you crazy, so you're in no fit state even to spend it."

The Minister of Information said, "What I took was only a loan without interest, because I find loansharking so disgusting."

The Lord said, "There isn't a single female employee in your ministry whom you haven't forced to go to bed with you."

The Minister of Information said, "What can I do when I'm force fed? I've just got to chew it up and swallow it down."

The Lord said, "Your wife is sleeping with her chauffeur."

The Minister of Information said, "I'll draw her attention to the fact that people are separated by their positions, and by class and status too."

The Lord said, "And your daughter chases after women."

The Minister of Information said, "And who amongst us here doesn't chase women?"

The Lord said, "Your son rushes from hospital to hospital, asking for them to give him a sex change."

The Minister of Information said, "Nobody knows my son better than I do – he's lazy and just looks to see how he can get out of doing any hard work!"

The Lord said, "Every week at least one of the citizens gets run over by your car."

The Minister of Information said, "If people were focusing on their work then they wouldn't be wandering around the streets bumping into cars."

The Lord said, "If I was to try and count all of your sins it would wear out my tongue!"

Bowing his head, the Minister of Information said, "Nobody is perfect. God made us to sin and repent these sins, and He is merciful and forgiving."

The Lord said, "How can you seek to be forgiven for your sins when you commit so many sins at work in such a shameless way? Why don't you answer those articles

in the foreign press which tendentiously say that each week I marry a new woman and then divorce her at the end of the week?"

The Minister of Information said, "Reputation is wealth, my longevous one, and reputation can never be poverty. The only reason why those scribblings exist is envy. If Antara ibn Shaddad³² lived in our times then he wouldn't be able to marry even a single woman."

The lord angrily said, "Answer them, because I won't be satisfied with you until I see your answer!"

The Minister of Information promised that at the first opportunity, he would plug their enemies' mouths so that they'd swallow their own tongues³³ and he kept his promise. A few days later, a beautiful girl appeared on Thai television, talking about her relationship with the Only Lord. She said that she had admired him and his masculinity from an early age and that, since she had become a girl and acquired the characteristics needed for the acts associated with married life, one night she snuck into the Only Lord's bedroom and caught him engrossed in reading a book by Ibn Haldun, verses by Muntanabbi³⁴ and listening to the Holy Quran and music by Handel. She tried to seduce him using all means, but did not succeed because he remained engrossed in reading and listening.

The girl uncovered her firm, dark-skinned breasts which were like apples and pears and red grapes, angrily adding: "I pressed them against his lips, but he didn't even lift a finger!"

To finish the story, she added in a shaky voice: "All of this proves that those rumours about him marrying one woman after another are lies and baseless slander. More to the point, I went into his room deflowered and emerged from it a virgin!"

³² Famous poet and knight from ancient times, a symbol of heroism – an Arab sir Lancelot.

³³ In the original this figure of speech is much stronger, but it is not clear how it can be translated because our language does not possess the extraordinary concept which is used here and belongs to Arab-Islamic culture. In Arabic, one "silences somebody" or "plugs someone's mouth", literally "by thrusting a stone in someone's mouth", however the minister doesn't promise to thrust a rock in their enemies mouths but rather the mythical matter which in dogmatic scriptures is described as "overburned bricks from hell engraved with the sins of all people."

³⁴ The most famous Arab poet, lived in the 10th century.

The Lord of the Land was now satisfied with his Minister of Information and was especially pleased by his reasoning and shrewdness, so he appointed him the head mufti of the land which he ruled and bestowed upon him a long fake beard which suited his new resplendent position. The first fatwa which he issued was to allow the threatened ruler to enter into a war against his criminal nation until they announced their unconditional capitulation.

-The Mufti's Brilliance-

The Only Lord of the Land and Its Slaves asked his mufti to teach a lesson to him and the other Muslims from all sides of the globe. The mufti said: "I will begin by thanking God who gave us the deserts to cover our faces with their sands in times of troubles and tribulations and for our eyes not seeing what is on our backs, because what the eyes do not see does not exist nor should we afford it any attention."

Mumbling, the Lord contritely thanked God with a prayer to provide him with an even greater quantity of sand, while the mufti continued: "We will teach our children that which we were taught by our fathers, and our children will teach their children that which they have learned from us."

To this, the Lord said: "These are our native values and traditions and we shall not digress from them; we will fight for them till Judgement Day, happy to endure the greatest sacrifices!"

The mufti continued: "The first task of every righteous wise man is to warn the powerful of all their mistakes so that they can attempt to correct them and desist from them, but the learned man who does not carry out this honourable duty is not a wise man and will end up in hell. My duty today, oh, you the longevous, is to remind you of those new streets for which you lavishly set aside huge funds to cover the ground with hard asphalt, fit for cars, but not fit as refuge for those in need of safety and salvation and which lead to nothing other than cracked skulls and spilt blood! If God had wanted streets, then he would have created them himself rather than leaving Adam and Eve's sons to waste time and money on them."

The Lord thought about this and then spoke in a voice which was drenched in tears, ordering that all of the streets be covered in a thick layer of sand, the depth of which should not be less than the height of a tall man.

The mufti said: “My task today is to warn all Muslims of a sinful habit imported from the countries of non-believers and that is the custom of kissing the female mouth. The woman was created with the sole purpose of giving birth, and kissing has no role in giving birth. Moreover, this kissing of the female mouth is, in fact, intended to humiliate man and deprive him of his dignity – because whoever kisses a woman on the lips won’t mind kissing them on the hands and then on the feet. But a true Muslim only kisses the hands of the clergy and his rulers so as to express his love, loyalty and obedience.”

The Lord’s face frowned and he issued a strictly binding order by which it was forbidden to kiss female lips and that only the kissing of the hands of those who were in power was permitted.

The mufti finished: “And my task is to remind Muslims that their brothers in the age of Caliph Omer ibn al-Khattab, may God be pleased with him, boiled pebbles for themselves to eat, so my question is why today’s Muslims neglect pebbles, even though their countries are abundant with them!?”

The Lord ordered that pebbles be imported from abroad, since tests confirmed that domestic pebbles were not especially good, so the mouths of the hungry were filled with pebbles, although this did not prevent them from complaining and grudging.

-The Leader and the Led-

The Minister of Supplies returned to his palace and beheld his wife, gloomy faced, moody, with bloodshot eyes as though she had been crying for a long time, and so asked her why she was like that. She angrily replied: “You really don’t know what happened!? People are praising you day and night, saying that thanks to you there’s enough of all the main foodstuffs in the shops and that they’re at cheap prices, too, so much so that even the most impoverished families cannot sleep because they’re so bloated!”

Astonished, the minister answered: “Have you lost your mind? Have you gone mad!? Are you actually upset because people love me!?”

The wife said: “You’re just a minister and you’ve got your superiors who are capable of ruining you whenever they want; if they find out that the world is speaking about you, then they’ll take their revenge and you’ll end up as their greatest enemy. If they’re a bit more merciful then they’ll satisfy themselves by removing you

from your position in the worst way possible. If they are a bit less merciful, then maybe they'll arrest you and skin you alive and then stuff your skin with straw!"

The minister pondered this for a few moments and then said to his wife, "What you're saying is realistic and clever. What should I do?"

The wife said: "Hurry at once to fix your mistake, especially since the public doesn't love you, not nearly as much as you love that ministerial armchair!"

After several weeks, the basic foodstuffs disappeared from the market and prices jumped. People went hungry and swarmed the minister, humbly begging for his help. Poisonously and ironically, he told them that there were a lot of them, considerably more than the country needed, and advised them to begin to eat one another, emphasising that human meat would be very tasty and alluring when prepared by skilled hands. But the minister did not save himself from that which he and his wife had feared because his advice had led people onto the path which, although guaranteeing them a free meal, had reduced the number of hands which were working and raised wages.

-There's Nothing Else for Us To Do Apart from Complain and Put Up with It-

Oh Prince of Believers, our fields have been seized by a vile locust which we cannot stop, and we don't have any supplies in the warehouses!

The Prince of Believers was astonished and ordered his greatest poet to write him a poem in which he would besmirch the locust and that doctors immediately write books about how good fasting is for one's health.

They told us that you are spring, but what sort of spring is this which destroys everything green!?

Prince of Believers, our strength has deserted us, we've become just skin and bones.

The Prince of Believers was surprised by these voices which were reaching his ears, so he ordered his newspapers, radio and television stations to double the amount of sports coverage.

They told us that you are wise, so is it wisdom which you use when you cut down a tree to stuff yourself on its fruits!?

Prince of Believers, even our rivers suffer from thirst, their sources have dried up and there are no clouds in our sky.

The Prince of Believers was aghast and ordered that clouds be imported from Sweden and that an investigation be immediately conducted into the rivers and their sources so as to establish why they were not fulfilling their duties.

They told us that you are a cloud, but what sort of black cloud increases a country's thirst? And that you built economic miracles in the country, but in our hearts you only ever built barriers and huge walls of hatred.

Prince of Believers, our pockets are empty, we've even forgotten what money looks like.

The Prince of Believers went pale and ordered that the doors to his treasury be opened to allow us to remember what we had allegedly forgotten.

They told us that you are the rich one, and how could you not be rich when you own the whole country and all of its slaves! They told us that you bring security, but under your rule brigands have become an army which cannot be defeated!

Prince of Believers, shame compels our wives to sit at home and not come out lest they be accused of being tramps married to tramps.

The Prince of Believers rejected this admonition and ordered his policemen to arrest shame and sentence it to the harshest of punishments.

They told us that you are just, but your justness is the only reason why people flee to the ends of the earth.

Prince of Believers, all the people are in trouble and strife, and their hopes are extinguished one after the other.

The Prince of Believers was aroused by these words and ordered his singers to sing until sunrise.

They told us that you're considerate, but all we see are gallows being built and bodies hanging beneath them; it was said to us that you love free people, so we ask you – are their skins only good for skinning?

Prince of Believers, our scientists are ignoramuses, our heroes are cowards and tradesmen, our most famous poets perform odes to killers, but sentence victims and lead to murder again.

The Prince of Believers became angry with these words of ours and took to criticising those who do not believe in the products of their country and its industry and those who see candlelight in foreign countries but don't even notice the clear moon or shining suns in their own.

They told us that you do not sleep at night, rather you keep vigil over the well-being of your subjects and we believed this; but blades will secretly seek out the necks of those who are like you the moment they shut their eyes.

Prince of Believers, our present is dust, our future is dust, our past is dust, our blood is dust – what should we do?

The Prince of Believers smiled just like a happy child and asked his astrologers that they urgently prepare an answer to our question which would definitely satisfy all of the desperate people.

They told us that you love all people, but even if you hated them you couldn't torture them much more. It was said that you willingly forgive, and you did forgive your enemies, but you didn't forgive your own people for even a second.

Prince of Believers, from the day we are born we are promised spacious graves which we will receive free of charge at the ends of our lives; but look – that which we are promised is just a lie, and all we have received is a renewed sense of belief in our own stupidity.

The Prince of Believers laughed and promised us that the whole sea will be our private cemetery where nobody will be able to interfere with us and drew our attention to the fact that a dead body which is buried at sea is always clean and does not require additional procedures to guarantee hygiene, which waste valuable drinking water.

They told us that you are the honest one, but in your courtyards we haven't seen anything other than wild and furious hypocrisy, destroying everybody who stands against it. They said that you are the noble one, but is the testimony of a servant to be believed?

Prince of Believers, your courageous bodyguards got used to getting around by riding upon our backs and necks.

The Prince of Believers was furious about the behaviour of his bodyguards and so ordered them to tread all over our stomachs and faces instead.

They told us that you are merciful, but our sole aim in life is to escape your mercy. And it's said that you're one of those who refrain from anger; we smile about this because we don't have anything else to do but to refrain from anger ourselves. They told us that you are the eternal one and it isn't a lie: would we be able to forget what has befallen us even by the end of time!?

Prince of Believers, our children are barefoot, naked and ill.

The Prince of Believers blushed with sorrow, then clapped his hands with enthusiasm at a dance by his slavegirls.

We were told that you are soap, but we haven't seen any soap, nor any foam.

Prince of Believers, our enemies besieged us on all sides and we wouldn't have survived had we not fought for it. That's why we entered into such a long war, determined to kill and be killed.

The Prince of Believers laughed like a father with a gracious heart and advised us to continue to give our all and search out the benefits for which we are created, because we're not made either for war or combat.

They told us that you are an angry sword outstretched, however, you're a sword which never points towards the enemy, but only towards the sons of your own land. We were told that you are the guard of your country and its protector, but what sort of a weird guard are you, when you ask your enemies to protect your country and spend huge amounts on importing tough guards!? They told us that you're brave, and a hero, but in which battles have you ever shown your courage and heroism?

Prince of Believers, this country is your country, but it's our country, too!

The eyes of the Prince of Believers filled with tears, his voice trembled and he ordered his swordsmen to chop off our heads, which they immediately did.

They told us that you are strong, and you are strong – at alienating yourself from your people. They told us that you're an inspired leader, but may God inspire us with patience and solace and may he at least grant us pleasant deaths.

Prince of Believers, everything you do is good. When you cut off our heads, you give us the chance to save the money which we would otherwise need to spend at the barber, you exempt us from the pain which we would otherwise feel from

rotten teeth and liberate us from headaches because of material things for which we're not able to find a cure.

-Fire-

We prepared a pyre which had no equal and one of us jumped into the flames to give us a chance to test how strong it was. The pyre burned him to a cinder straight away, in a few seconds, and we, having learned to trust it, also threw the moon, which shines only in the nights during which we need darkness, into its flames. Then we threw the towns which had flown a white flag into its flames, and we threw the mothers who had forgotten that they are mothers into its flames, and we threw the fathers who hated their children into its flames, and we threw the children who hold their fathers and mothers and grandparents in contempt into its flames, and we threw old, worn-out clothes which remind us of long humiliations into its flames, and we threw the rulers who died but hadn't been buried into its flames, and we threw books which are like the blind who refuse to lead the seeing into its flames, and we threw the homes which are like holey socks into its flames, and we threw the canes and whips and investigators and prisons and gallows into its flames, and we threw the trees which don't bloom or bear fruit into its flames, and we threw all of the tears which we have into its flames, and we threw the ashes from old fires into its flames, and we threw the oppressors into its flames, but then the fire went out and we just remained oppressed.

-Our Thin Cows³⁵

(1) General Ahmed Sayfullah, commander of the army, stands as a candidate for president of the republic and in his electoral manifesto announces that he is not only a military commander, but also a great scholar who has succeeded in discovering a new medicine: this medicine enables an eighty-year-old man to take four women and even this not to be enough for him but rather for him to moan and complain that he wants more.

And the general promises the whole nation that he will distribute the medicine which he had discovered to them for free.

When the general did become president of the republic, he broke his promise and didn't distribute his medicine to people, rather he satisfied himself by just him and his men taking the medicine, so nobody was able to save themselves from

³⁵ An allusion to the Old Testament story about seven years of famine.

the rapes; neither male nor female, indiscriminately, young and old, the living and the dead.

(2) We mockingly laughed when we heard that General Ahmed Sayfullah, commander of our army, had put himself forward for president of the republic. He's a fool and a coward and a braggart and had only ever won battles in bars and gambling halls! But the police informed us that the general is a man who is fiercely loyal to his people and homeland and that anybody else who also feels that way should do nothing other than give him support and give him their vote.

A magnificent and dignified sheikh appeared on the television and in a humble and shaky voice, with his eyes moist with tears, said that he saw our Lord Muhammad (peace be upon him!) in a dream and that he heard him stress that whoever should vote for General Ahmed Sayfullah would not have to take the tests set by Munkir and Nakir³⁶ in their graves and would instead go straight to heaven.

Since we all longed to live in heaven and were especially careful not to anger the police, we all raced to elect the general as our president. But we didn't reach any sort of heaven and the policemen continued to persecute us as though we'd killed their mothers.

(3) My wife awoke me from my sleep to tell me that it had been announced on television that an unknown individual had assassinated on Ahmed Sayfullah, and that his position had been taken by some other general whose name she couldn't remember. I closed my eyes and yawned, not paying any real attention, since it wasn't me who had been killed, nor was I the killer.

-People's Delegation-

We went to the recently elected president of our republic and, in words devoid of any hypocrisy, congratulated him on gaining the confidence of the people who hate the spectres of the generals and their mob of soldiers. But, cutting us short, he said: "Don't bother wasting either my time or yours with this sort of rubbish! However, if you've got any requests then don't even hesitate to bring them to me and I'll satisfy every one of them under the condition that they are reasonable and acceptable."

We told him that our streets and alleyways were full of holes and that you can't go along them safely.

³⁶ Frightful angels of death.

He smiled and said to us: "Let them stay as they are because you won't have any need to walk along them."

And he promised us that he would give every one of us a flying car.

We told him that the water which we drink everyday is disgusting, so much so that even our cats won't touch it.

He smiled and said: "Forget water! In my new era, you'll drink beer or champagne whenever you get thirsty."

We told him that our houses are dingy and that there is no sunlight or air. His face flushed red with anger and he ordered that the houses be demolished right away and promised us that we will reside in luxurious palaces instead of our miserable hovels.

We told him that our prayers to God, no matter how pleasing they were to Him, remain unanswered because the minarets at our places of worship are as small as dwarves. He smiled and promised that he would provide us with the most modern loudspeakers available on the market free of charge.

We told him that our doctors are negligent and greedy and that there's ever more illnesses rather than fewer of them. To this, he ordered his fiercest guards to protect the borders and prevent all illnesses from entering the country and if any dare to show disobedience, then they would be executed without trial.

We told him that we work from sunrise to sunset for a mere pittance. He laughed and promised us that we would work for only two hours each day and that the remainder of our hours would be intended for flirting with women.

We told him in a hoarse voice that our wives are ugly and that they've got scathing tongues. He smiled mildly and told us to get rid of them immediately, and promised to arrange marriages to the most beautiful women for us.

We returned to our ruined houses to live with our wives who had become even more ugly, nagging and stupid, to work every day from sunrise through to the following morning's twilight, to walk along our alleyways with cuts in our feet, to drink the water which even the dogs refused and to perform our humble prayers to God which echoed out of speakers which make a racket and bring us nothing apart from sleeplessness.

Our president whom we once elected, and who thereafter elected himself on every subsequent occasion so that we wouldn't have to needlessly exert ourselves, died.

Our president died after having sat for a thousand years on our heads which were filled with all manner of joy, and we scrambled to bedeck ourselves in the darkest robes we have and set off to offer our final farewell, crying, wailing and sobbing with bowed heads.

When night fell, the sorrow, which had been growing more and more, darkened our vision and thought, so we lost direction while floundering on top of our wives and we were no longer in any condition to distinguish hills from valleys, whilst our wives no longer attempted to correct our mistakes or set us on the right path, rather they restricted themselves to following our intakes and outtakes of breath and the bitter, pained cries, so the catastrophe was complete and no help whatsoever could be found in patience.

Our president died, but his daughter, a beautiful girl, took his place, and we whispered to one another that "a beautiful killer is better than an ugly killer!"

The president's daughter opened her era with a short and resolute address, full of promises, but we had heard from reliable sources that by no means did she like this hunger for women, so widespread amongst men, that it held back the country's development. Consequently, she also promised to shag all of the men, but the newspapers made no mention of this noble and meaningful promise at all, instead praising at length every loyal citizen who thought up new methods for eliminating class divides. But we didn't want the president's daughter to break the promise which she had made, and so we said: "The president sat on our heads for a million years, but his daughter can at least sit down on our 'helmets'."

Our wives mocked us because of our optimism, predicting that the rider would become the ridden, but we didn't need to bother listening to them – we were a fish that could hardly wait for its fisherman.

A strange rumour started up that the president's daughter regarded as an enemy each man who slept with her in one of the ways inherited from the past, so we started proudly competing in our readiness for that which is new and original, reasoning that those who collect honey do not mind getting stung by bees.

The president's daughter was seen walking everywhere around her court undressed and we sighed, admiring that deep annulment of differences between

the rich and the poor and remembering that the best fruits are eaten only after the skin is peeled back.

The president's daughter ordered that the prisons be destroyed and we joyously smiled because it's a small difference between liberation and nudity.³⁷

The president's daughter received in audience the worst killers, robbers and drug dealers and, standing before her in penitent excitement, they announced that they felt regret and that they would dedicate the rest of their lives to the building of hospitals and schools. But the president's daughter did not allow them to withdraw into retirement in such early years of their lives, because civilised countries are those which make wise use of the abilities of all their sons, as a whole, so she placed them in the most important positions. This didn't interest us, because we didn't have anything which was worth stealing, and our wives, if they were to become widows, would only be still uglier, dressed in black as is suitable for mourning.

The president's daughter passed a law which compelled all citizens to undergo free operations in state hospitals so that men would become women, and women men. We did not oppose this, in fact we could barely wait. We'd been wearing ourselves out for too long and the time had now come for us to rest and sit at home a bit. We only feared our wives who watched us sneeringly and maliciously, the threat of terrible revenge being visible in them.

The president's daughter also announced that she would be the first person acting in accordance with this law and have herself turned from a woman into a man, and we drunkenly cheered because we realised that in the near future we'd be getting that which we hadn't got in the past, and that which we had aspired did not know the difference between lower and upper, nor between eater and eaten.

We'll Laugh... We'll Laugh a Lot

(1) One day, the police burst into our house. They searched for my wife and me, but they couldn't find us because I'd turned into a hat stand and my wife had turned into a comfortable sofa, and we laughed a lot when they left the house disappointed. (2) One day the sky was clear and blue, without a single cloud. We

³⁷ A play on words – at the same time it means “between consolation and the vulva”.

went to an orchard, when suddenly, after only a few minutes, the police stormed in with the intent of arresting us. But this was to no avail because I'd turned into a black raven which tirelessly croaked and my wife had turned into a tree with green branches. And we laughed a lot at their failure. (3) One day my wife started to complain about her chores in the kitchen so we went to a restaurant. But, all of a sudden, just as we began to eat, the police surrounded the place. They stormed inside with their moody faces and began searching for us by methodically checking everything, but we'd vanished, since I'd turned into a knife and my wife had turned into a glass full of water, and we laughed a lot after they deflatedly left the restaurant. (4) One day while we were strolling along a wide street, full of people and cars, window shopping, all of a sudden the police blocked the street and began to arrest hundreds of men and women. But they didn't manage to arrest us because I'd turned into a wall and my wife had turned into a colourful billboard stuck to this wall, and so we laughed a lot at their stupidity. (5) One day we went to the cemetery to visit my mother, but the police burst into the cemetery and arrested my mother, but they weren't lucky enough to arrest us, because I'd turned into the words inscribed upon a tombstone in black ink and my wife had turned into a bouquet of withered roses, and we laughed a lot at their naivety and simple-mindedness. (6) One day we set off hurriedly to the hospital, excited, because my wife was pregnant, in her ninth month, and it was time for her to give birth. And just as our newborn child's lips were about to attach themselves to their mother's breast which spurted milk, the police suddenly piled into the hospital. But they couldn't find us because I'd turned into a dirty white lab coat and my wife had turned into a mirror on the wooden closet packed full of clothes, and our child turned into the siren on an ambulance. And we laughed a lot at their slow-mindedness, and we'll keep on laughing.

9

The Reward

Nasuh al-Fani walked slowly, fearsome and dignified. People ran up to him to humbly kiss his hand, and he responded in a shaky voice, beseeching God to give them success, much money and honourable offspring. When he arrived home he beheld his wife Hasiba, engrossed in reading a women's magazine. She sat sombrely, with an expression of disgust upon her face as though she was surrounded by rubbish. She received him without any greeting, nor did she honour him with a single look, while inside himself he cursed the moment when he had married a beautiful, young girl.

He had barely sat down upon the sofa next to her before Hasiba held out a bundle of court papers. They concerned her friend Rihab and she wanted her husband to look over them and offer his thoughts within his capacity as a judge. He briefly flicked through the papers and declared that the case was lost. She informed him that she really loved her friend Rihab and wanted to do everything she could for her. He replied that he also loved her friend Rihab and wanted to help her in every way possible. Then he added that she was a nymph who had escaped from heaven, her look alone having the power to raise the dead, and so she deserved every type of help. But the case was hopeless and she could not win the litigation unless some of the data in the papers was changed. Hasiba offered him an eraser and pencil and said, smiling knowingly, "Come on, you do that, but you should know that neither I nor Rihab allow ourselves to remain indebted to anybody who does a good deed for us."

He asked how she would repay him and she brought her lips up close to his ear, whispering the answer. Nasuh reached for his beard with his right hand, stroked it and said, "By God, such a reward would overjoy anybody immensely, and the promise of a free man is debt."

63

He took the eraser and pencil, devoting himself to applying professional counterfeiting techniques to the data in the papers. When he had finished he proudly gave them to his wife, assuring her that, without any doubt, the case would be favourably resolved. She smiled shrewdly at him and advised him to gather his strength for his imminent meeting with her friend.

10

The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil

I remember that I entered the restaurant with a jaunty stride in my step, headed for the table at the far end of the hall and then all of a sudden heard a man speak to his wife, not lowering his voice whatsoever and pointing at me, “That’s the bloke the police are looking for. He carried out the worst robbery in history!”

His wife’s reaction wavered between stupefaction and terror, but I didn’t burden myself with this, telling myself that the man had pointed at me by mistake, thinking of some other bloke amongst those who were sitting in the hall.

But before I could sit down at the table, an unusual whispering started up, accompanied by interrogational looks cast in my direction. A man with a dark complexion then approached me, well built, smoothing out his moustache, and said “Is it really possible that you could be so bold!?”

I looked at him questioningly and so he added “You did what you did, and yet you still come to such a public place?”

I didn’t take his words seriously, instead I thought that the man was either joking with me or that I was in fact dreaming. I asked him “And what precisely have I done so as not to be allowed to enter this sort of place?”

He once again stroked his moustache, which seemed as if stretching out, whilst a smile jerked on his face, and said “For two days all of the newspapers have got your photo in them, and the police have written beneath these photos that a financial rewards awaits whoever hands you in at the nearest police station since you carried out the worst robbery in history. And yet you’re the last one to find this out!”

“Me?” I said as though it dropped out of me.

Before he made any comment, the man took a folded newspaper out of his pocket, opened it and showed me my photograph, above which, in large letters, was written WANTED, and then he said, “Is that not a photo of you?”

“It is.”

He smiled, “Personally, I don’t want the reward money because I wouldn’t want to hand anyone over to the police, but I suggest that you bear all of this in mind.”

“You’re a good man,” I replied, “but I haven’t committed any sort of robbery whatsoever.”

Turning to return to his table, he added: “Thank you. Clearly that hasn’t prevented them from being after you and issuing an arrest warrant for you.”

The waiter came over and, hesitating, asked me what I wished to order for lunch. I told him, “I want a knife for cutting meat.”

“And what else?”

“Just a knife.”

“Of course. Immediately.”

He left and returned soon after carrying in both hands a tray made out of woven straw, across which lay a knife. He placed it upon the table in front of me and then backed off.

I examined the knife’s blade. It was sharp. I cut my head off above the neck, placed it on the tray and then carried it over to the dark-skinned man.

He was entirely occupied by his food when, pointing to the tray, I addressed him, saying: “This is my head. Please hand it in at the nearest police station.”

The mouthful he was chewing at that moment got stuck in his throat. He then replied: “You’ve done the right thing. There’s no need for the whole of you to go there. And like I said already, I wouldn’t want to hand anybody over.”

“I’d like to ask you to do me a favour,” I said. “Apart from that, they won’t pay you a reward just for my head.”

A grain of rice flew out of his mouth as he laughed at the top of his voice, saying: “Well, sir, the reward is on your head, since it was that which brought you to thieving and not the size of your shoes.”

He then stopped laughing and added “I’ll hand in your head, but what’s stopping you from coming with me? Maybe they’ll need some of your other body parts as well.”

“Nothing’s stopping me,” I said. “We can go there together.”

The policeman found it most important to sing some trashy song all the way through to the end, rocking on his chair in time to the music, not bothering to check our ID cards until he had forced it all out. He looked at the dark man’s ID and returned it to him, but he didn’t even want to check mine, instead asking “You’re the owner of this head, aren’t you?”

Not waiting for me to answer, he added in English: “*You are wanted!*”

He yawned and said to the dark one, “Go over to the counter and claim your reward.”

He answered: “I don’t want the reward. We just came to hand in the head because that was what he wanted.”

“Do you seem to think that this world is just some sort of chaos? The amount set aside for the reward has already been entered into the budget and our planned expenditures so you’ve got to take it.”

My head squirmed on the tray and called out: “He’s within his rights to give a statement saying that he refuses it, and the money can then be returned to the safe and assigned to other uses.”

Casting a belittling look at my head, the policeman said, “What is this filth?” He then left us with the words: “The reward has to be accepted.”

Before the dark one could begin to say anything, his hands were tied together with an iron chain, and a younger policeman shoved him towards the station’s rear corridor.

The policeman got up from his chair, ordered me to pick up the tray and to come with him, leading me into a long, winding cellar passageway, the likes of which I had never seen till then. He then threw me into a rather long, dark room, locked the door behind me and left.

A magnificent voice accompanied by an echo rang in my ears. “Do you remember when I told you to eat from all the trees?”

"I can't remember."

"I told you loud and clear: just don't eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil."

"I don't remember that at all."

"I forbade you from doing that, but you did it anyway. So? You are damned, and your ancestors, and your descendants, and all of your kind!"

"I didn't do any of this stuff you're talking about."

"Well who picked the red fruit and gave it to the porters, shoe cleaners and beggars?"

"I did."

"Hadn't I previously forbidden you from picking the fruit from that tree?"

"I can't remember, in fact I, can't remember having ever heard your voice before."

"I'm speaking with you now through a loud speaker."

"I don't understand what's going on."

"All you understand is robbery, isn't it? You are damned, and your ancestors, and descendants, and all of your kind!"

"What sort of stupid performance is this!?"

"Performance? You think that I'm some sort of theatre comedian, you good-for-nothing!? You're forgetting that I gave birth to you and made you!"

"Well, I can accept all of this apart from you doubting the honesty of my mother."

"I breathed life into you and thus you became a living soul, and on top of everything, you're making a fuss about this and acting all important and you persistently deny remembering anything!"

"I think you've got me mixed up with someone else."

"Put your head on your shoulders so I can check who you are."

"But it's dark in here, you won't see a thing!"

"I see what can be seen and what can't be seen."

“What are you talking about!?”

“Put your head on your shoulders!”

I picked up my head from the tray and put it in place. I stayed silent, until the voice again called out, “You’re that one they’ve been writing about in the local papers, the one who stole from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.”

“And what else?”

“I ordered you not to touch the fruit on that tree, since the second you eat it you become mortal.”

“So will I definitely die now?”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying that I’m buried in life, so let a burial in eternal death be your doing.”

“I’ll deprive you of that comfort. I’ll satisfy myself by once again publicising in the newspapers, on the radio and television – let the whole world know – that it was you who committed the Original Sin, that you learned to lie with women. My curses will torment you until the end of the world and the end of time.”

But just as silence entered into the depths of the darkness in the room, I heard how in a shrill voice I said: “Our father who dwells in the darkness! I won’t let you bury me in life and won’t let your people continue to hang the microphones from their tape-recorders at the windows of rooms!”

I then added “Our father, is my candidness really the cause of your anger? Does my love for red fruit and bodies in which spiders make webs in the nooks and crannies enrage you? Will you pour your fury out upon the man whose daily bread is all he’s got, who is satisfied when he sees his mother smiling and tending to blooming roses?”

And then I added, “Our father, my soul is woeful unto death!”

69 Salwa Bakr

11

How The Peasant Woman Kneads Her Dough

-1-

The door opened suddenly and the sunlight soaked the dark mud hut which had no other openings. At this, all three monkeys began to shriek and jump up and down, in the hope that it could be the beginning of the end to the suffering which they had endured throughout the whole of the previous night.

The first monkey, who was named Zaquz by their keeper Sharshar, attempted to be courteous and, when Sharshar burst through the door, raised a hand as though to greet him. He didn't respond to this in any way, maybe out of haughtiness (since he looked down on the monkeys), but maybe just because he had quickly turned to his wife who had entered after him, leading a goat. They had, namely, brought a goat, for whose presence at that moment the three monkeys could not see a single sane reason. In any case, when Zaquz saw that the man did not acknowledge him with any sort of polite gesture, he swallowed the insult and dropped his hand back down onto the floor, as though he were waiting for something.

Marzuq, the second monkey, who resembled his friend Zaquz in every respect apart from his body which was not so young and fit, while the wrinkles on his face were more pronounced, was, apparently, the breed of monkey which is characterised by kindness and reconciliation, since he was satisfied just to watch what Sharshar would do with the goat. He took off the military cape which (as Marzuq, of course, could not have known) he had purchased in the date workers' cooperative and Marzuq during this time just sat peacefully, neither uttering a sound nor making the slightest movement which could attract attention. It all looked as though it didn't concern him the slightest.

Sharshar, for unknown reasons, called the third monkey Maatuq; whether that was because it rhymed with the names of his other two friends or whether that was because he had some unclear feeling which said that this name suited him best; this monkey, in whose eyes seriousness and considerable self-esteem could be seen, remained huddled in his place.³⁸ He felt dissatisfied and immensely depressed because of his stay in this cramped, dark place, in which he had been forced to spend the previous night. They had brought him there from the spacious, stoney monkey-house at the zoo, and so he now felt trapped, deprived of his view of the wide-open sky and the possibility to run around everywhere.

The fact was that Maatuq was a particularly complicated personality, and that he didn't take anything whatsoever simply in the same way as his friends did. He was prone to philosophising, and so, for example, during the whole trip, from the moment when Sharshar had purchased them from the zoo until he arrived in this shack, he played out the various possible scenarios which had stood behind the zoo's decision to relinquish them to this individual whom they called Sharshar. He said that Marzuq was an old monkey who they got rid of because he constantly argued with the other males, whilst Sharshar had perhaps paid so much for Zaqzuk (given that he was still young) that they just couldn't refuse, and so they relinquished him, too. But as far as he was concerned, Maatuq, there was absolutely no doubt that they had rid themselves of him at the zoo because he had instigated a strike amongst the monkeys in the monkey-house, refusing to be fed on clover every day of the week. In this way the management of the zoo was forced on some days to swap the clover for various types of fruits and vegetables – those which, as he had witnessed a hundred times, the zoo's officials took home with themselves at the end of the working day, regularly stashing away the majority of the food which a good number of visitors donated for the monkeys in the monkey-house. And all of these supplies were, of course, perfectly adequate for the monkeys to have a decent standard of living, nothing less than that which they had got used to in the forest.

It would perhaps be more honest to say that Maatuq was not such a complicated psyche, but rather he was simply a monkey who had more experience in life than his colleagues. He was the only one not born in the monkey-house, instead in the great forest, the edges of which touched the ocean, which to every monkey, even

³⁸ The name of the third monkey, along with the two normal names (Zaqzuk – Chirpy; Marzuq – Provider), hints at the main event in the story: Maatuq, along with *The Wise One*, also means *Liberated*.

the young ones, offered the possibility of occupying the top branch of a coconut palm, from where there was a broad vista. His eyes watered at the natural beauty, the roar of the azure blue water could be heard, still untainted by modern urban effluent, various melodies from all sorts of birds, the soul can feed itself on the greenery which reigns over all other colours, and from it spreads another thousand and one different types of foliage which calm the soul and ennoble the spirit.

And thus, even after Maatuq had settled in the monkey-house, having been brought with his mother, he never forgot that beautiful and abundant life which had been taken from him – the sort of life made for every true monkey, suitable for jumping around, getting into fights, finding his own food with his own bare hands; essentially, to live life as he wishes and in the way he chooses.

But Sharshar did not waste a second thinking about the personality components in any of the three monkeys. He was an old monkey keeper, interested in the monkeys only as far as it was necessary to train them in the shortest possible time frame, using a method he inherited from his father, who had inherited it from his father, and he from his fathers and grandfathers. They had all been masters of monkeys and knew how to judge their abilities. For this reason, it hadn't even crossed Sharshar's mind to ponder the monkeys' feelings, nor to worry about their misery. Never, not even on one single occasion, had he wondered about their dreams or wishes in life, because he was far too concerned with the need to teach them "how the peasant woman kneads her dough", "how the bachelor sleeps", "how the prince walks" and "how the watchman keeps sentry", so that he could then sell them on to another monkey keeper for a decent profit or earn from them himself on the streets and in the souqs. Sharshar's wife stepped out, and then quickly reentered the hut carrying a long thick stick in her hand. Since Zaqzuk, as we have already said, was always gullible and full of himself, he moved with the intent to jump onto the pole and take it. He wanted to show his ability and dexterity as befits a monkey in the flower of his youth, but he was held back by the chain to which he was attached. He didn't, however, feel any frustration because at that moment Sharshar suddenly screamed, baring his fangs, and began hitting the goat with all his strength, shouting: "Come on! Show how a bachelor sleeps! Quick!"

Instead of mimicking the way in which bachelors sleep, the goat began to bleat and scream, in the type of voice which only a goat which is being maltreated for no discernible reason could ever make. It tried to free its legs which were bound, and when it did not succeed at this, it then started to squall and object even more.

The three monkeys, cowering in a corner of the hut, exchanged questioning looks. Maatuq tried to make sense of what was going on, but all of the information which he possessed about the goat species, accumulated in the corners of his memory from the time when he lived in the jungle, led him to perceive them as meek creatures that run fast, eat grass and the bark off trees and hand over their bodies as tasty snacks to lions, tigers and the jungle's other carnivores without a great deal of resistance. Not finding an acceptable explanation for the comedy which was taking place before his eyes, he was inclined to stick to silence, ordering his thoughts for another attempt at understanding.

It was strange that instead of halting his thrashing of the goat, which already appeared to be on its last legs – its bleat having become a wheeze, its long red tongue hanging from its frothing jaw and its eyes rolling back in its head – Sharshar beat it with ever more vigour, furiously yelling: “How the peasant woman kneads her dough! Do it, otherwise I'll drink your blood, you billy-goat's daughter!”

The goat – indeed being the daughter of a billy-goat – did not take this as an insult, but understood that this evil creature, who was beating her without any good reason whatsoever, would definitely finish her off. She started to bleat pleadingly for him to show her mercy and stop thrashing the living daylight out of her. But, just at this point, without having shown any indication that the walloping would be interrupted, he put his military cape on over his robe, tightened his worn out tie around his neck, and quickly pulled the goat outside, once again locking the door to the hut and the three monkeys inside it.

-2-

On the first day following those dreadful events, the three monkeys were exhausted from thinking about Sharshar's violent actions towards the poor goat. Zaqzuk, who knew nothing about goats, put forward the idea that the goat must have snatched from Sharshar's hand a banana which he had already peeled and wanted to bite into himself. Marzuq, who was by now famished, not having eaten anything since their arrival to Sharshar's pitiful hut, agreed with Zaqzuk's idea, albeit with one minor alteration – instead of a banana, he believed that the reason for the quarrel was probably a handful of peanuts. Maatuq was terribly irritated by his two colleague's small-mindedness and the discussion's base level, and as such looked to speedily debunk the theories of the banana and the peanuts, confirming this with the fact that goats do not have a tradition of eating such things.

Anyhow, Sharshar didn't leave them with enough time for any further scrutiny regarding the goat's problem, rather he suddenly burst into the hut, wearing his cape and tie, the longer end of which hung down beneath his chest, across his robe (whereby upon first seeing it, the monkeys thought that the tie was a type of rope used to bind him by other human beings, ones who were even stronger and more wicked than him). Just as on the previous day, he took off his cape and hung it on the room's only peg – nailed into the cardboard poster of a smiling blonde sipping *Coca-Cola* – and his wife entered with a goat. The scenes from the previous day began once again, albeit with minor deviations. The expression upon Sharshar's face then altered, he rolled up his sleeves and began to beat the goat, but something new occurred: while shouting "How does a bachelor sleep?", he turned over onto his back and stretched out upon the floor, then raised one of his legs which resembled the goat's to a great extent, apart from being covered in considerably fewer black hairs.³⁹ He then crossed this hairy one over the other (which was itself no less shaggy), while at the same time folding his arms behind his head. The whole time he kept repeating to the goat that she, too, should do as he did and show him how bachelors sleep, or else she would be served with a beating which had never before been received by either a jinn or a human.

For the peasant woman and the dough, he jumped to his feet and began imitating the movements of a peasant woman when she gets hold of dough and starts to stretch it out to get as much air into it as possible so that it might rise better. But although the goat had often – in fact, countless times – seen peasant women carry out this far from easy task, the poor thing never thought that she would have to do it. Sharshar hit her with a burst of even more savage blows, directing the most awful curses at her, which reflected all of the powerful creativity of the underground which he belonged to, and only stopped when the goat was about to expire. He then yanked her out of the hut and forcefully locked the door behind him.

-3-

A summary of the events was that the three monkeys were completely confused by Sharshar's savage behaviour, for which there was absolutely no explanation. Zaqzuk, who was always drawn to say something, opened his mouth to speak but was silenced by a single glance from Maatuq which said "shut up". Suffocating his voice, he almost stopped breathing as well, and Marzuq settled for just saying, "Company, this actually looks more than a little serious!"

³⁹ In the Levant and the Middle East, goats are most often black or ginger.

-4-

When Sharshar came and flung open the door on the third day, it looked as though he had lost his patience. The three monkeys' hearts pounded with fear and terror. Marzuq, whose tail was being trodden on by the terrified Zaqzok, didn't make a sound. Enduring the pain, he remained silent and made no attempt to push his friend off. This time the goat arrived completely exhausted, eyes rolled back in its head, bleating abjectly even before the tormentor's beating stick had been raised to her. When the torturous performance began and the bludgeoning started to rain down on every possible part of her scrawny body, it becoming as clear as day to every eye which sees and every ear which hears that whatever happened the goat wouldn't begin to knead dough like a peasant woman, nor would it sleep like bachelors, a nightmarish surprise occurred which petrified all of them: all at once, Sharshar pulled a sharp knife out from the deep pocket in his robe, plunged it into the goat's neck and slaughtered her, at the same time recounting both testimonies.⁴⁰

-5-

The three monkeys didn't shut their eyes for the whole of the following night. Since Sharshar had left the hut and locked the door behind him, after he'd taken the blood-drenched goat out, their nerves had been frayed like a piece of rope. The stench of blood which had not entirely dried out filled their nostrils and spread as chills to the rest of their bodies. The true danger of their situation became clear when Maatuq asked his two colleagues a bombshell of a question, "What happens if Sharshar comes tomorrow and wants us to do the same as he wanted the goat to do?"

Zaqzuk attempted to object to the question on principle. He said that it wasn't possible for him to demand such a thing from them, since they hadn't done anything to anger or offend him, whilst there was clearly something behind his relationship with the goat which had motivated him to kill it.

Maatuq formed a derisive smile at this, since long ago in the jungle he had seen things which would have more than satisfactorily served as an answer to that which Zaqzuk had just said. The prey never provokes the predator which devours

⁴⁰ At the slaughter of an animal, Islam prescribes, among other things, the ritual utterances which declare ("testify") that there is only one God and that Muhammad is his prophet.

it. But instead of engaging in a pointless discussion with Zaqzuk, he opted to ask Marzuq for his opinion, so that the three of them might come to some sort of conclusion with regards to this quite considerable problem.

Marzuq cleared his throat, attempting to appear calm, and then said: “The fact is, I don’t think that he’ll want the same from us. In any case, we’re not goats and there’s every chance that tomorrow he’ll return us to the monkey-house. But even if he does demand it of us, what’s the problem? It’s all perfectly simple – all we’ve got to do is copy his movements, which don’t seem to require that much effort or particular care. On the other hand, I think we really need to think carefully before objecting to him or refusing to carry out his orders, since he’s clearly a complete psycho who won’t even hesitate for a second before slaughtering us just like he did the goat.”

Maatuq interrupted him, “But just a moment ago you said that we’re not goats!”

Marzuq scratched his little head, his look darkened, and he added: “Exactly, but you yourself saw that knife. Apart from that, he’s got us shackled with these chains, as you can see now. God alone knows what other means and methods he has which we don’t have the strength to stand up to!”

In exacerbation, Maatuq asked him “And what about our sharp nails? And our teeth? And our pointed fangs, my friend!? Don’t we have them?”

Marzuq fell silent and didn’t answer. Maatuq often had extreme attitudes and exhibited improper conduct, as though he hadn’t learned anything from the lessons of the past. He hadn’t duly learned his lesson after they threw him out of the monkey-house and locked him in the solitary confinement cage when he convinced the other monkeys to reject clover. Because of this, Marzuq wouldn’t follow his point of view for even a moment, nor would he follow his advice, because the evil Sharshar could kill him and in that case he wouldn’t have slightest bit of use for Maatuq’s words, since – as they say – you only live once.

Maatuq spat on the floor when his friends turned away from him and started to talk about what they would do when they got back to the monkey-house. Zaqzuk said that he’d get married immediately and would bring together a group of females around him – his own personal harem – and with this he would secure his descendants who would preserve his memory in this world. Marzuq, for his part, said that as soon as he arrived safely in the monkey-house, he’d thank God for looking after him and kiss the ground, and would then live in seclusion. He

wouldn't have any arguments or fights with any of the other monkeys, no matter what happened, even if tears of fury poured from his eyes!

-6-

The next day, Sharshar and his wife came in, without the goat, of course. He began his ritual of removing his cape and baring his canines, then took the stick in one hand and stretched out his other hand, yanking Zaquz by his chain into the middle of the hut, and in a voice full of belief in success said: "Come on – how bachelors sleep!"

Zaquz started off a little confused, perhaps because this was the first time that he had to act a role which he didn't already know well. Confused, he began to show how the peasant woman kneads her dough, rather than how a bachelor sleeps. He immediately felt the consequences of this – he received two powerful strikes to his buttocks, which as a result became even redder.

The woman, who stood and observed the young monkey, intervened and said to her husband: "Leave him, Sharshar, you should have shown him first!"

Sharshar turned over onto his back, taking the position of a bachelor as he sleeps, just as he had already done on several occasions, and Zaquz started to imitate him charmingly and with ease. The woman laughed gleefully at this, and Sharshar also seemed to cheer up by seeing her good mood, saying: "Well done, lad! Fine, and now – how does the peasant woman knead her dough!?"

His wife now bent over a little and started to pretend to knead dough, fidgeting and flirting, to which Zaquz somehow managed to just about compose himself and devote a huge mental effort into not jumping on her, rather he bowed his head like hers and mimicked her hand movements. For the first time in his life, he appeared intelligent and composed and did well with the dough, kneading it until Sharshar ordered him to stop. Having seen this, his wife said, "In the name of the prophet, isn't he sweet and well-natured! Offer him to the circus, Sharshar, they'll definitely give you good money for him!"

And she pulled a banana out of her bosom, broke a bit off and tossed it over to Zaquz, who grabbed it in disbelief, since he hadn't tasted a banana since he'd been brought to this place. It was clear that the other two monkeys were next in line because Sharshar returned Zaquz to his place, bound him to where he'd

been and then started to alternately examine the other two. Finally, for whatever reason, he opted for Marzuq.

Marzuq copied the moves made by his friend a little earlier, albeit without the same ease or exceptional skills – maybe because he was old and less dextrous. The woman commented indifferently on his performance, “He’ll do, Sharshar, you can have him, or sell him to one of the other monkey trainers.”

Sharshar, in any case, had already decided this without her input and so just nodded his head without saying anything.

It was now Maatuq’s turn. Sharshar pulled him into the middle of the hut, but the monkey moved slowly, without showing any visible desire to obey him. Sharshar squinted his tiny eyes and shouted: “How does a bachelor sleep!”

Small as he was, Maatuq stood without moving – just the tip of his muzzle quivered and his nostrils flared to allow more air into his chest. The monkey-keeper threateningly repeated his order: “How does a bachelor sleep – quick!”

Maatuq still didn’t respond.

Sharshar was angered, he cleared his throat, scratched his head and then changed his order. “Fine, you little shit, do how the peasant woman kneads her dough!” And Sharshar firmly fixed his gaze on the monkey’s, eyes which kept watching him perfectly steadily and calmly, and then said “Listen, you’d be better doing as you’re told – don’t even think about provoking me! Come on, pretty boy, how the peasant woman kneads her dough, and then you’ll get a banana!”

But Maatuq, who was by no standards a pretty boy, bent over, showing off his nudity, and then started fiddling with his toes.

Clouds of anger began to amass over Sharshar’s forehead, heralding a storm. In astonishment, he sinisterly raised his eyebrows and his thin lower lip pouted, announcing a burst of rage. He stretched the stick high above himself with the intent of giving Maatuq a strike across the backside.

But an even more intense wrath had accumulated in Maatuq’s chest – not just in that moment but from the second that Sharshar had slaughtered the goat and let its blood soak into the ground. Then, entirely calmly, he raised his arms and thrust his nails and teeth into Sharshar’s body. At first the latter was petrified from the surprise, but then began to defend himself and shoved him off.

But Maatuq's bite was imbued with all of his suppressed anger and extinguished dreams about returning to the wide-open world, where the blue ocean meets the endless green jungle full of magical birds.

It is said that the following day, after this strange occurrence, Sharshar found himself in hospital, Zaqzuk in the circus and Marzuq wandering the streets, begging for his daily bread with another monkey-keeper, but Maatuq had been returned to the rocky monkey enclosure at the zoo, deemed unsuitable for training. It is also said that he spent his days there recounting stories to the young monkeys about the splendour and beauty of the jungle which they'd never seen because they'd been born into a world made of stone.

79 Salwa Bakr

12

Off Flew the Little Birdie

The plan was carried out precisely, just as it had been conceived.

He entered the bus first, at its terminus next to the public car park, the man with a deep scar upon his neck. The bus then passed through the shopping district, moving at a snail's pace through the bottleneck of cars, crowds and all manner of goods spilling out of the belly of the souq onto the pavement of the streets and lanes.

Another one jumped on as soon as the bus slowed down in front of the station for the old part of the city, whose large new rectangular buildings competed in their marathon across the sky, having swallowed up forever the till-recently quiet and sleepy gardens.

The third, a man with an anxious look about him and quick, sudden movements, which his lean, taut body carried out with ease, grabbed onto the pole at the bus's rear entrance as it set off from the stop by the city's big park which separated that bit of the city from the next neighbourhoods, the appearance of which could be anticipated by poor street lighting, and most often none whatsoever: the pavements was uneven and the road unfinished and full of potholes. The bodies of the passengers followed the ups and downs and lefts and rights of the bumpy ride whenever the bus went over a pothole or the driver swerved to avoid one of them.

Having gotten on the bus, the third man first began to observe whether his two friends were there. Having seen the first who was standing in the front part, directly behind the driver, and the second who was huddled at the rear, on the back seat, he raised a hand to give them a signal that it was to begin. He squeezed through the other passengers who were standing up and, once he had arrived at the front of the bus, the other two pulled out those well-known flick-knives with the handles made of fake gazelle horn, the first holding his blade under the

driver's throat, the second under the conductor's. Even more quickly, with a move which he had practised, the third took out a revolver, pointed it at the passengers who were both seated and standing, and shouted: "All of you, hands in the air! Don't anybody even think about moving!"

The aghast passengers hesitated in disbelief for a few moments before raising their hands, just as the conductor did too, paying no attention to the Belmont cigarette which he was holding between his thumb and his index finger, given to him by a mate who sold mothballs by passing through the bus, boasting about his goods, and then hopping out again.

The driver was the only one whose hands didn't fly up. He continued to hold on to the wheel, just as the lead one with the revolver had ordered him to do only notably slower, again under the same directive. This, however, didn't prevent him from grimly considering how long the robbery which had just begun would now hold him up. He longed to get home as soon as possible and drop like a sack of coal onto his bed, to finally get a good night's sleep and rest from the torment and fatigue of a whole day's work. He also thought about how the passengers would demand that he deviate from the route and take them to the closest police station where, once the robbers had escaped, he'd have to draw up a report, so he snorted angrily, finding yet another reason, along with all of the others, to curse that black day when he'd taken up employment as a driver for the Municipal Transport Company.

At that moment, the company's clientèle in that bus numbered thirty-five people, of whom at least six had fallen into a deep sleep since the second or third stop because the majority of them lived in the neighbourhood around the bus's final stop. Those who had drifted off didn't even know what was transpiring around them, and so were spared, at least for the first few moments, the effort of holding their hands aloft. But the one with the revolver shouted at them so as to rouse them and they stuck their hands up like the rest of the passengers.

One little boy, the only child on the whole bus, huddled in his mother's lap, thought that everyone around him was playing some sort of game called *off flew the little birdie* and so he grinned and, full of joy, raised his little hands up too. But as his waiting in this position became prolonged, and, as would be in accordance with tradition by this point, his mother didn't tell him that the little birdie had landed or lower her own hands to her lap, the toddler became unhappy and was overcome by tears. The one with the revolver directed his gaze at him, which gave the child a fright and so he burrowed his head into his mother's bosom.

The mother began to feel overcome by worry. She was so tense, not so much because of the pound and a shilling which she'd wrapped in a cloth and slipped into her cleavage (since she was counting on even these robbers not being such vermin or so impudent as to start pawing around between her breasts), but rather she was seized by anxiety and fear that they might take her goose, which was in a straw bag beneath her seat, especially since the goose had begun to poke its head out and, little by little, protruded.

Unlike her, the robbers were not thinking about the goose, nor about how she had raised it and fattened it up so as to take it today to her daughter, for whom a week had not yet passed since she got married, and was now going by bus to visit her, with the intent of staying over and butchering the goose in the morning. They were far more preoccupied with the speedy collection of money from the passengers.

The one from the back went from one passenger to the next, demanding that each of them get out all of the money they had on them, as well as taking off any watches which they might be wearing, and especially anything made of gold, like rings and earrings. Because of this, a peasant who also found himself on this bus endured one of his most fearful moments since, along with the nineteen pounds and thirty pence which he had in his pocket, he also had a molar with a gold crown on the right side of his jaw. He held his mouth firmly shut and silently took out all of the money from his pocket, not opening his mouth to whisper even the slightest protest.

In contrast to this, the young recruit on the seat next to him had his jaw wide open in utter amazement. He needed to go by bus to the final stop, from where he would head through the desert for a further three kilometres to the barracks. He couldn't believe that scenes befitting a violence-filled American film were being played out before his very eyes. The truth was that he didn't have any more than a quarter of a pound in his pocket so the thieves could take it and then just go to hell, he thought to himself. But he felt the bitterness of injustice at having to hand over his provisions for the journey, in which his mother had packed him three hard-boiled eggs, a loaf, a big onion and a rather large beetroot.

It turned out that his apprehensions were unfounded. For some reason, the robber who was collecting the loot saved himself the trouble of asking the soldier to hand over what he had with him. It seems that he was led by the ancient wisdom that the wind cannot blow anything off bare stone and so simply saved his precious thief's time.

Instead of having the courtesy to give the soldier (who was by no means the decoration of the Egyptian nation, contrary to the words of a popular song) a single look, the robber ordered an old man sitting in the next row to get out his wallet and hand it over. The old chap tried to find some mercy in him, saying: "On the life of our Prophet, leave me five pounds, nothing more than that; my daughter, the little darling, needs to buy some plimsolls so that she's got something to wear tomorrow for Children's Day at school!" But the robber shouted at him to shut his gob and so he was silent.

A thin black man in the back row of the bus came out with more or less the same request, although in this case he asked to be left with just three and a half pounds. When the robber didn't answer him, he began to mutter to himself, cursing his own stupidity and poor foresight: if he'd stayed sitting in the coffeehouse, playing backgammon and smoking narghiles, then he'd have blown about one hundred and fifty qirsh on this, and the thieves wouldn't be taking it now; but no, he'd wanted to seem decent and clever and so had said to himself: It's better for me to take the kids a bag of fruit to cheer them up, rather than just playing games here and larking around.

A young man with his arms full of books and glasses with thick lenses was ordered to stop scraping his feet across the floor by the robber with the revolver because it was irritating him, with him threatening to cut off both of his legs if he dared to move them even one more time. At that point, the one who'd been collecting the money announced that he was done, having taken four pounds and sixty pence from the lad. The gunman asked, "And the conductor?"

The collector responded: "We checked him, he's not worth the effort."

Angrily and in exacerbation the gunman exhaled, saying: "Well, take what little he has, as a punishment to the state!"

And he started to swear at the passengers and threaten them, warning that nobody should move from where they were, when he was interrupted by the loot collector, "This woman with the kid has some poultry, should I nick it?"

The man with the revolver thought about it for a moment but was afraid that the goose might start to honk along the way and as such lead them into trouble, so he didn't answer his companion but rather ordered the driver to open the door (which hadn't been opened since he'd got on) and beckoned with his hand, ordering the other two, "Come on, hop out – quick!"

In the blink of an eye, as the bus drove off, the three of them took off quicker than the wind towards the ruins behind the old mosque, and further on from there, to the street parallel with the bus route.

They sat down to catch their breath, then started to count the money and look at the rest of their booty. This was comprised of three wedding rings (one of which was silver, but the other two snapped beneath the teeth of the robber with the scar, revealing that they were made of worthless painted tin), five wristwatches, two of which didn't work and two which were brands that hadn't been heard of for at least the last thirty years. The income from the money taken from the passengers and the conductor amounted to exactly – in words – sixty-eight pounds and ninety-three qirsh.

The one with the revolver shouted: "Sons of bitches!"

The one with the scar joined him, saying that right now he'd happily smash something up, but since he couldn't find anything suitable in the ruins around him he took off one of his shoes and began hitting the ground with it, saying: "Scum! They're filth, the lot of them! What a shithole of a country we live in when this is the breed of passenger we've got!"

The other one of the two with knives made of gazelle horn, the one who had been holding his blade under the driver's throat the whole time, liked his companion's comment – the whole situation, in fact, seeming quite comical – and so burst into laughter which echoed through the empty ruins, "So tonight we'll have enough to fill up on kebabs and pay for them honestly! The carnival is over, we're returning to reality... All in all – it was a wild-goose chase!"

The robber with the scar added to this, fiddling with it just as he usually did when feeling nervous, "This great big bus, full to the brim, and they've got no more than sixty-eight pounds between them! It's such hard times! It seems that someone else had already done them over before we even showed up."

The thin one, with an anxious look, answered him through a bitter and derisive smile, in keeping with the third companion, "Well, they must have been bigger thieves than us... the biggest of all. The ones who only play for big stakes! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

1

A Note about the Author, Story and Title

This story was published in Baghdad's eminent literary magazine *Al-Aqlam* (*Quills*) no. 6/1979 without even the most cursory of notes about its author. The presumption that he was so well known that it was enough to provide the average reader with nothing more than his name and homeland has not been vindicated: nobody whom I have asked – be they students of literature from various Arab countries, or journalists, or professors at Iraqi universities, or experts on the Orient in Belgrade – had ever heard of him, let alone any of his other works. A few years ago, after an unexplained hiatus, the magazine in question again started up, but upon sending a letter to its editorship, and thereby following my one and only clue, I still have not received any answer.

Whilst awaiting an answer, I continue to make enquiries here and there by means of numerous meetings with Arabs (which the nature of my profession has kindly bestowed upon me), and it is almost as though I am not really hurrying to uncover the desired facts. The writer of this circuitous account, a Middle Eastern follower of Poe, Wells, Akutagawa and, perhaps, Borges, a fellow-traveller of Pekić or Kiš, whose heroes are brought to life without arousing even a shred of doubt in such a *possibility* (somehow, we are all perfectly aware that Ali ibn Alwan is eternal and indestructible, because all people are ibn Alwans - after all, both names, both Ali and Alwan, signify *loftiness* and thus an *affiliation with the sky*), could have had a good reason to make use of a pseudonym.

I also imagine (probably again without any basis) that he could in fact be better known in the West, going under some sort of foreign name which he has used to publish a number of works in English, French or, as you please, Eskimo; it also came to my mind that he now lives far from his homeland (voluntarily? forcedly?) in so much as he was beset by the same misfortunate glory as other masters of the pen who share the fate of the characters which they themselves

created, having dreamed up in them a vision of their own destiny. However, if this is the case, I do not know whether we are now allowed to view him as being unfortunate, for we know from his story that he would then also have to soon appear in a new place?

But, whoever the author might be, the spirit with which he created the substance of this story, the certainty with which he organised its subject matter and the impeccable language of the original led me to devote dozens of hours to it, in the belief that the story alone deserves publication in Serbo-Croatian even before it would be equipped with the customary accompanying material which offers precise information about its author. With this, it would immediately be built into the being of our culture, leaving a little additional toil (or chance), to allow it to play out its humble role in the presentation of contemporary Arabic literature through our closer familiarity with the author. Such an order of affairs would certainly be in keeping with the will of its creator.

* * *

The title of the original is *Mulhaq li-t-taqrīr al-wārid ‘an al-mad’ūw Ali ibn Alwān*. I rejected the alternative translation of *Report Supplement* not just because *appendix* is usually an administrative word, but more so because the dative construction, as a case of ownership in Serbo-Croatian, suits me more than the genitive case; after that only (perhaps entirely redundantly) a rational justification appeared: the more genuine dative-formed *Appendix to the Report* maintains the dimension of *movement-actuality* in cyclically experienced time, while it is lost in the solidity (stasis) of the genitive.

Unfortunately, I was unable to preserve certain finesses which one could smoothly convey in an English translation of the title as *An Annex/Appendix (=mulhaq) to the Report (=li-t-taqrīr)*, using the procedure of *one-to-one correspondence*, commonly known as *literal translation*; this procedure would be justified for this title, even though it has more in common with geometry and arithmetic rather than translation, which is far more related to mathematical logic, combinatorics and integral-differential calculus. Nevertheless, I do not think that we are permitted to be jealous here. Serbo-Croatian is a language which does not have articles, nor does it show a particular inclination to develop them, rather for the most part it just satisfies itself with flirting with particularisation through the words *jedan* (=one) and *neki* (=some). Moreover, I personally believe that I am a linguistic patriot, even when I come to terms with the fact that the aforementioned finesses

are barely discernible in our translation, keeping in mind that the bare nouns in the title do not even give a real chance to the adjectival aspect which Serbo-Croatian justifiably prides itself upon - I say “justifiably” because I know that it is unaware that for a long time it has started losing them.

The registrar’s term *al-mad’ūw* (literally *he who is called, he who goes by the name of*) reveals that, under the lustre of this ancient expression standardised one and a half millennia ago, Arabic fortunately maintained its elastic use of a participle without which our language suffers greatly, struggling with the demands of time like a sinner with his soul. I am almost resentful at the thought that the English *The One (Who Is) Called* or *The One Named* (ideally it would be just *The Named*) might better suit both the Anglo-Saxon linguistic manner and the original phrase itself as well, than the similar Serbo-Croatian circumlocution of *the individual who goes by the name of* (which I chose without undue indecision) suits our linguistic sensibilities – I had to be careful not to use the word *person* given that I am sure that, considering its conceptual content, it would never find a place in a report by the secret police.

Finally, the story which is called *Appendix to the Report*, is built like a *hypertext*, in the quasidocumentary form of a report which contains within itself other reports as well, and at the end also delivers a further two attachments: attachment “A” and attachment “B”. Only the latter is important - the first being entirely predictable. Hence, the use of the singular in the title. The same also applies to visible characters, the pair of ibn Alwans – and many more of them – who are all one. But this was masterfully ensured by the author himself; all that remained for the translator (the first reader of the potential Serbian *edit* of the same story) was to take it in and acknowledge it.

Belgrade, 1989

Baghdad, Beirut - several years later

Nowadays in Serbia we know almost nothing about the development of modern prose in Saudi Arabia, although from various signs it can be presumed that free thought, which is the only means by which a story such as *The Attachment to the Report on the Individual Who Goes by the Name of Ali ibn Alwan* can be created, did not find particularly convivial conditions in that country. I translated this story in the middle of the 1980s, during my stay in Baghdad which lasted several years, and this translation (accompanied by the prior note) appeared in Serbia in

In the autumn of 1995, again residing for an extended period in Baghdad, I asked the Iraqi writers Abdul Sattar Nassir, Abdul Khaliq al-Rukabi and Majid al-Samarrai, then the head director of the magazine *Al-Aqlam* and a living encyclopedia on the happenings in Baghdad's cultural life over the previous three decades, to read the mysterious story. As though in one voice they all declared that Abdullah Hakam was not a real name, rather a pseudonym behind which could only hide the Saudi Abdullah Bakhishwin. During the mid 1970s a large number of young Saudis studied at Al-Mustansiriya University in Baghdad, the oldest in the Middle East; only one of them spent his time writing - that was Bakhishwin.

Feigning naivety, I asked why this young man, surely in search of publicity, would use a fake name when publishing this story in a magazine read throughout the whole Arab world. My friends were amazed. They began to compete with one another to contrive the potential consequences which would befall that young man, should it become known in his country that he has written *such* a story. Had not Abdul Rahman Munif, the recipient of a doctorate in Belgrade and an expert on Ivo Andrić, had his Saudi citizenship forever revoked, and was he not forced to emigrate precisely because he had published his famous "prison" novel *East of the Mediterranean*? They reminded me how the magazine's editorial board had been relieved of their positions not long after this story appeared, deemed as being politically unsuitable, and Samarrai remembered how his author moved to Lebanon somewhat abruptly, under rather unclear circumstances.

⁴¹ The confusion concerning the authorship had, as was heard later, another, "domestic" episode as well. At the meeting of *Literary Word* editorial board for the issue's layout, having judged that there was no indication that this was a translated text (especially since it was an Arabic text in question, which, so the presumption implies, cannot be fluently translated), and that a person going by my name and surname surely does not exist, Gojko Tešić claimed that the story was written by the hand of some local maestro (or at least a budding future star) who put it forward under an eccentric pseudonym and the mask of a translation - all in the manner of Borges, in so much as there is a deceitful accompanying note to boot. All were in accord, however, that, despite everything which was as clear as day to them, the story still deserved to be published because it was a real gem of short prose which would not bring shame upon any world anthology, although the truth would surely come to light sooner or later. Vasa Pavković, who was in possession of the facts, arrived late at the meeting - but just in time to pitifully stick his neck out, giving a true testimony on the whole affair. Thus, to the general disappointment, the magic vanished before it had even begun.

Abdullah Bakhishwin, they told me, was born in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in either 1950 or 1951. He first studied in Damascus and then, after leaving Baghdad, being socialist-inclined, worked in Beirut on the editorial board of *Worker's Conscious*. It is said that there he published a collection of short stories entitled *Al-Qatala (The Killers)*. They remember that he participated as a guest at the first Mirbad International Poetry Festival, which took place every year in Iraq for around two and a half decades, where on numerous occasions some Yugoslav poets also took part. After some years had passed, he returned home and today he reportedly lives in Saudi Arabia, although nobody knows his exact address. In an interview for French television at the end of the 1970s, Abdul Sattar Nassir stated that amongst all of the far Arab East's short story writers, Bakhishwin was the only one to have truly impressed him, although at that time he knew virtually nothing about him as an individual.

At this time, from a relatively reliable perspective, all that we know about Bakhishwin's life is a few facts - if those are indeed facts at all. The conviction felt by his fellow members of Iraq's literary circles, that he and Hakam are one and the same person, has led me since 1995 in search of Bakhishwin's stories. Until this very day I have not found even one of them, be that printed in magazines, in the bookshops of Cairo, Kuwait and Aman, or amongst the pavement vendors of Baghdad's Mutanabbi Street, where in recent years Iraqi writers have laid out their own personal libraries. I never received any replies from the editors of cultural columns in Arabic language newspapers in both London and New York in response to several queries I made by email. The promises which I received from Iraqi writers that they would put me in touch with Bakhishwin through their private contacts have not to this day been fulfilled. Moreover, neither Abdullah Bakhishwin nor Abdullah Hakam are to be found amongst the names of Arabic authors whose translated works sit upon the virtual shelves of Amazon, the world's largest Internet bookshop.

But, the story about the countless *individuals* going under the name of Ali ibn Alwan looks to me like a compelling enough motive for me to carry on searching. And I do this, not losing hope that at the end of this search, we might be able to read another story by the same author who wrote this extraordinary work, whatever he is called and whatever name he might publish under.

Zemun, August 1999.

I yesterday received from Cairo three new books from a large-circulation Arabic series via a traveller in the region. Each of them is already in its second or third print run. The first is a novella, while the other two are collections of short stories. One of these collections, *Tales from the Gulf*, a selection of works by renowned writers hailing from various countries of the remotest Arab East, arrived to me still smelling of the print room out of which it emerged with the help of UNESCO's *Books for All* programme. The twelfth of the twenty-three stories in *Tales from the Gulf* is called "A Song for Death, a Song for Lunacy", and its author is Abdullah Bakhishwin.

The story tells the tale of a hopeless marriage proposal which is undermined by the elitist arrogance of her father and the jealousy of the bride to be's drunken brothers, and then follows the sorrowful proposer, who himself gets drunk and spends the night in gaol, since Saudi Arabia's Sharia law strictly forbids drinking alcohol, from where he is saved by a friend who has connections in the police force. Because of her unhappy love, the girl commits suicide in a mythical way - she just heads off into the desert and is never to be seen or heard of again. The story is well written, in a somewhat bare language and pure style, but it does not have the power to irresistibly compel me to translate it (all I can say is that it is just missing "that special something").

In the meagre notes about the author on page 79, I read: "Born 1372 (after the Hijra, thus 1951 or 1952) in Ta'if; published a collection of short stories entitled *The Celebration*, 1405."

Zemun, 20 November 2000.

The Internet or the Mother of Networks

While completing the final editing of the text for the book *12 Impossibles* and checking over the information in the notes about Abdullah Hakam, who might be, but equally might not be, Abdullah Bakhishwin, I notice that midnight is fast approaching and remember that I should immediately check my emails because of some work I have planned for the following day. I turn my Internet connection on and, all of a sudden, as though somebody had switched me to a different operating mode, I go on to *Google* and in Arabic letters type in *Abdullah+Bakhishwin*.

A mere coincidence is sometimes better than a thousand agreements, according to one Arabic proverb. The name I sought now appeared at several addresses. On the site of Saudi intellectuals (www.riyadh.org.sa/intellectuals.html), last updated back in 2000, I found his full name, which itself offers more than I could have ever hoped for: Abdullah Hakam Hasan Bakhishwin. Born in Ta'if, in 1372 according to Hijra. He completed primary school. He had a cultural column in the journal *lqra'* (*Read*), and afterwards worked as a director of the Culture Office within the Gulf Cooperation Council. He was involved in some quite controversial wranglings with local scribomaniacs, who pay huge sums to prominent local publishers to publish their books. In 1405 he published a collection of short stories, *Solemnity*, along with many other stories and articles in literary magazines. He participated in a number of meetings with other authors, literary evenings and festivals, both in his homeland and in other Arab states. Several years ago he devoted himself to his own private business, although he does continue to write, particularly reviews for newspapers and magazines. Address: 21 342 Jeddah, PO Box 5919.

Belgrade, 26 April 2004.

*The Indestructible Little Man or
the Phantom Resurrection of Suspects
in the Contemporary Arabic Short Story*

In 1989, a translation of the story *The Appendix to the Report on the Individual Who Goes by the Name of Ali ibn Alwan* by the Saudi writer Abdulah Hakam appeared in Issue 336 of *Književna reč*. I found it in the Iraqi magazine *Al-Aqlam* during my first stay in Baghdad, but it was not accompanied by any supplementary notes about the author – a rather bad tradition which Arabic language newspapers and magazines jealously cling onto. It is a “cop” story in a similar way as Saghir’s: like Jesus Christ the Saviour, those who have been liquidated are resurrected and then drive their killers to complete madness.

In contemporary Arabic prose, fiction of a postmodernist provenance is less present than here in Serbia, and as such this story appeared to me to be a rarity. Publishing the translation, I found it necessary to accompany the text with a description of my unsuccessful search for information about the author. I have always suspected that he signed it with a fake name. Taking into account the political circumstances both in his homeland and in the country where it was published, the reasons for such a viewpoint are clearly provided within the story itself, and quite plentifully as well. To this very day, I continue to make inquiries as to the possible identity of its creator and firmly believe that I shall at some point meet him.

Six years later I was once again in the city of *One Thousand and One Nights*, which often goes by the nickname *House of Peace*. Ever since a state of war prevailed, the Baghdad-based regime had been careful in public appearances to call the capital by this particular moniker, rather than any of the other numerous titles which it has amassed since the Middle-Ages. Iraq was on the verge of a six-year international blockade. Inflation had spiralled out of control, along with unemployment and hunger as well, and as such, trade came out onto the streets, everything was now for sale. I often went to the main flea market for books, at the point located by the junction where the Saray and Al-Mutanabbi Streets meet. On

one occasion I noticed six editions of *Al-Aqlam* from the end of the 1970s lying the floor – from the time of the editorial board which would subsequently find itself broken up. One copy was devoted to Western Arabic (Maghreb) literature, which is where the writer of *The Confiscation of Mr Vladi's Voice* comes from.

Idris al-Saghir, a Moroccan, was possibly one of Hakam's school friends, I thought, or maybe they were teacher and pupil, or a fellow party comrade. Or probably none of those. I hastened to make inquiries about Saghir (and again about Hakam) amongst the editorial board of *Al-Aqlam*. These investigations amongst the new line-up, however, turned out to be useless – all of them replied that they did not know anybody from the old team. I believe that they were telling the truth. The mechanism by which disobedient editors are replaced with obedient yes-men is not a speciality of any particular country, but, in fact, belongs to the generally acknowledged achievements of global civilisation. Nobody showed a will to answer a foreigner's frankly suspicious questions about writers whose stories had been published by their ousted predecessors, the mere titles of which filled them with a deep sense of foreboding. The similarities between Saghir's and Hakam's stories (especially when read as translations which were made by the same hand) could lead to the thought that this is the same author in question, but whoever has access to the original texts will see an irrefutable difference in the *handwriting*. What is actually in question here is the phenomenon of spiritually related writers who we will always come across, especially in the context of those people who are "swallowed by the darkness". Hakam, whom maybe exists, and Saghir, whose name is not unknown in Arab literary circles, are present here – one in Saudi Arabia, the other in Morocco. The third, fourth and nth are in third, fourth and nth countries, Arab, Latin American, European – quite possibly anywhere on this pitiful planet.

From this, it could be inferred that it is not necessary to read these stories in Arabic. The same single person could not be forced to write two such similar stories. More than the differences in their *writing*, this morphological closeness suggests to us the thought that they are actually two artists who did not even have to have heard of each other.

Although we can never know whether there is any sort of hope for our planet, we know that there would not be any hope whatsoever without the existence of Hakam's *Ibn Alwan* (who, killed countless times, always reappears once again throughout the centuries), Saghir's *Voice of Mr Vladi* (indestructible, he echoes

through the school and surrounding alleys, defying those who destroyed the mortal body of the most popular village teacher) and other similar heroes. Some stories even wait for their writers, in various languages, whose number, despite the deaths of many, is still steadily growing – from the moment when the Tower of Babel came crashing down. Such stories are saving this world because they manage to bring it to a state of consternation over itself and help it to cope with itself.

Hakam's story is a narrative series of documents within a document. Saghir's is just like a short film: living scenes are lined up, one after the other – landscapes, interiors, medium shots and close-ups. The frames are clean and substantive, the scenes sharp, montages witty and precise, the colours are warm and the tones are soft.

Hakam's language is simple and correct. Saghir's is at some connection points particularly rich, simple expressions passing at fateful moments imperceptibly into the sublime, delivered into an unctuous and pleasant glow. Eastern Arabs are terribly proud of their *easterness* because they are closer to the source of their mother tongue, namely the East, than their western brothers. I would be more than pleased to encounter Saghir's more humble "western" Arabic in stories by those easterners who flaunt that illusive property of theirs (writers from Kuwait and the U.A.E. for instance, and most Iraqi writers, too), most commonly abusing the unimaginable richness of their vocabulary and the incomparable elasticity of the syntax found within their ancient tongue.

I found out very little regarding the writer of *The Confiscation of Mr Vladi's Voice*. He lived, or is living, in Casablanca. He has been in Iraq, Damascus and Beirut at literary gatherings on multiple occasions and won awards of lesser importance on a number of occasions. Although he published at least one collection of short stories in Baghdad, I did not manage to get my hands on it, despite being acquainted with many writers and probably all of the most important book vendors in the city. I am inclined to conclude from this that many of his other stories warrant being both read and translated – why else would the Iraqi edition be so thoroughly sold out? The writer and critic Abdul Sattar Nassir, with whom I regularly met whilst translating his works, tells me that he is probably the only person from the Baghdad literary circles who does not personally know Saghir, since he was somehow always away travelling whenever Saghir came to Iraq. He and the painter Hamdi Mukhlif provided my dictaphone with a little information which I had myself already pointed out, commenting that Saghir was born in

1947, that he published at least seven collections of stories in his own country, just as many on the route between Baghdad and Cairo, that he is lame and that he is more than a little partial to the odd drink or two – information which should be taken to be very relative given that there was nothing left in the bottle of arak which stood in front of us other than thin air. Of course, this is almost entirely redundant information as far as this man, Nassir, and the majority of his and Saghir's pals from Baghdad, Beirut, Cairo and elsewhere are concerned. As things stand, an unsuitable love for the bottle is more than understandable, irrespective of whatever prejudices someone might have about others, and especially about writers and poets from Arab-Islamic society – from those geographic regions, it means, where the finest secretions, fermentations and distillations made from grapes, grain and dates enjoyed the status of important trade items for at least three or four millennia longer than in Europe. It does not even matter that in these particular regions the price of those same products suddenly rose about fourteen or, who knows, maybe forty centuries ago, after some people chose to proclaim them to be sinful in a positively unnatural and futile endeavour to instil mere temperance within the realm which since time immemorial had been possessed by poetry, magic and insanity. Much like the bloodthirsty executioners who thus defend *peace and order* in Saghir's story (those to whom the reborn voice of their innocent victim invokes a deadly fear deep within the bones), the owners of that maniacal undertaking, a plan to abolish the very last refuge of the illusion of freedom, were also champions of kowtowing to the dominant power, since through the ban on wine drinking and unfettered words they wanted to destroy this breed of poetic disobedience, claiming that in the darkness of the caves above Mecca – or Jerusalem, it's all the same either way – they had heard spectral voices proclaim terrible and horrific punishments for transgressions of so-called divine laws.

Baghdad, June 1995 / Belgrade, June 2002.

About the Story, the Writer and the Translation

When Horses Ripened was first published in 1984 in a special edition of the Kuwaiti literary magazine *Al-Bayan*, which was dedicated to the theory and practise of translation. For the well-informed members of the Author's Union in Kuwait, who drink countless teas between five o'clock in the afternoon and nine o'clock in the evening while watching the news broadcasts within the confines of the oasis that is their humble clubhouse, in unanimous agreement that the authorities do not interfere with the publishing of such allegories and that authors do not suffer any dangers, it was not difficult to quash a foreigner's ludicrous presumptions that the story was somewhat stealthily hidden between the issue's introduction and presentations of academic studies. Besides, the writer is a respected trade-union leader who knows full well that democracy is making inroads within the country every day.⁴²

The title of the original, *Wa tanbut al-ġiyād sanābila*, highlights a fantastic antithesis: the verb *to grow* (only for crops) insinuates towards the subjective plural noun *ġawād* which means *a thoroughbred, noble horse* – an animal held in such high esteem by the Arabs that its name has been present ever since the beginning of time in the list of personal names for humans (*Dževad*). This collocation is unusual and possesses an extraordinarily aesthetic potential, and so threatens to slip through the translator's craft unnoticed. Emerging from centuries of po-

⁴² My early return prevented me from chatting with the reputable members of the aforementioned society about the new law which the Kuwaiti parliament adopted at the end of June 1992. I believe that the allure of its title, *The Law for the Protection of Artistic Creations*, would also be a popular topic for discussion amongst them in the context of around one hundred clauses found within the law, which stipulate the obligation of artists from all branches to submit their works for review by a panel composed of respected professionals from the world of culture. This lauded panel, made for the good of the artist and the public, and without the right to delay the imposition of a final judgement on the work (because such a course of action would be damaging not just to the artist but also unnecessary, given that it does not require much time anyway), will decide whether the work is suitable for presentation to the public. Concern for the artist has gone so far that even writers who spend others' money in advance to create harmful works are entirely protected from potentially insolent benefactors who abuse their contractual right to publicly show such inauspicious creations.

etic tradition obsessively preoccupied with descriptions of bridled animals (and aren't the fastest gallopers along the paths of our own epic poetry also Bedevias, mares whose bloodlines can be traced back to the Bedouins?), this word lacks an equivalent in the conceptual and lexical fund of the target language. The adverbial accusative *sanābila* (like corn, in the form of corn) is here, together with the verb *to grow*, transformed into the perfective form of our verb *to ripen*, in order to fulfil the colours of the Daliesque painting. Released where it did not have a place, the story passed by unnoticed. Four years later, it was included in another collection by the author *Relief of the Ulterior*.

The name of the happy kingdom in the original reads as *'Abqakās*. The word is not just made up – rather, it consciously stands out from the Arabic language's phonological-morphological system. Translating the text, I made use of my perspicacity; I offered the author of the story the following solution: *'abqakās* < *'abqa* + *kābūs* = *suffocation* + *nightmare*. He was not impressed by my thought that in a story about horses, insomnia and death, the key could lie in the detail that in various mythologies the *nightmare* (*cauchemar*) is associated with the notion of a black mare. For my second attempt, I suggested the form of an acronym which is read back to front, letter by letter, from left to right: *sīn* < *sumuwuwuhu*; *alif* < *amir*; *kāf* < *al-Kuwait*, etc. In this perverse way, it is possible to get a construction which, for people of equally perverse minds, could mean “H. H. Amir of Kuwait...”. I could not refrain from also mentioning to the author the fact that his own surname reveals a migrant Iranian origin. The surprisingly cold tone of his acknowledgement (which was possibly somewhat forced), that “it is still not time for him to reveal *what the writer wanted to say with that*”, told me to give up with the whole lark.

I do not have the slightest doubt that Ajami faithfully fulfilled the promise which he made to me on that occasion, that he would *attempt* to get hold of a copy of his first anthology *The Crack*, published in 1982, for me. I did not receive it. The book was attacked because of its obscenity (starting with the title itself) and the writer himself was gravely concerned that his own children could find it and read it.⁴³ Suspecting that photocopying somehow remained an unused tool, I tried my luck in the Central Library, the University Library and in one of the city libraries – all in vain. From testimonies given by other Kuwaiti writers, I know that his disappointment due to the reaction his book received took a full four years to pass.

⁴³ Nevertheless, eight years later I found a copy of it, which had not been pulped, in the personal library of a would-be specialist in Arab studies.

According to his own account, when he reached thirty years of age he stopped writing political allegories and all that tomfoolery, and turned more passionately to syndicalism, embracing the norms of Islamic behaviour – *glory be to He who forgives!*

Ajami's expression is unusually simplified, the language almost dilapidated, the text being for the greater part comprised of short situations and dialogues free from any higher syntactic component. Scenes are divided by three blank lines and asterisks, a style which gives an account which is simple and strict. The Kuwaiti Sulaiman al-Khlefi, whose short stories feature a different technique, thinks that the language of Ajami's stories is unique amongst writers from the Arabian Peninsula. The choice of an ostensibly sparse form of prose seems to amplify the striking strength of Ajami's imagery, so that building upon this is then left freely to the reader.

The less grateful among these latter ones, the translators of his stories – if they turn up – will encounter the joy of co-authorship in the painstaking search for instruments and moods characteristic of the language of translation, in order to compensate somehow for the loss of the distinctive Semitic associative connections between *roots* inside an expression skinned to the bone.

4-5

*A Note about the Author, the Prison
and the Function of a Coffeehouse*

Over a period of thirty years, Abdul Sattar Nassir (Baghdad, 1947) released roughly the same number of collections of short stories, some of which have had countless editions, although they still find themselves banned to this day. It should not be forgotten that he also wrote a few novels and some short plays as well. He admits that he is unable to define exactly what he does, but believes that his readers do know.

Nassir regularly riles the passions of the Arab public, critics and censors with his stories since he openly writes about love and hardships of the spirit, soul and body downtrodden by brutal deprivation, which in Arab-Islamic society is inappropriate even to mention, let alone to contest. The popularity which such a style of writing acquired prompted the authorities to issue him a serious warning after he dared to publish the story *Our Lord Caliph*.

The story of *Our Lord Caliph* first appeared at the end of January 1975 in the magazine *Al-Mawqif al-adabi (Literary View)*, edited out of Damascus by Zakariyya Tamir. The author was arrested on 9 February of the same year. He was taken away from work at around midday and thrown into solitary confinement, where he would be held for the next ten months. He was eventually freed following mounting pressure from public opinion due to intervention in the case from the author Buthayna al-Nassiri (his former wife at this point in time), the poet Adonis and many other Arab and foreign writers through International PEN, but actually only after Ahmed Hasan al-Bakr received a letter from Kurt Waldheim, the United Nation's Secretary General, personally admonishing the then then-president of Iraq and demanding that the artist be immediately and unconditionally released.⁴⁴

This story has been translated into many languages and hundreds of pages have been written about it all around the world. It has not yet been included in any of

⁴⁴ It is interesting to note that the Nobel Prize winner Naguib Mahfouz refused to sign the petition, announcing that Nassir is a salacious libertine, insufferable and vulgar, and so he deserved no better treatment than that which he had received. George Meredith is reported to have said almost the same about Oscar Wilde when he was asked to sign a similar petition in 1896.

the Iraqi or broader Arabic anthologies which concern themselves with contemporary short stories. Its author firmly believes that this will never happen.

The danger of once again ending up in prison has threatened Nassir on numerous occasions. Such was the case in 1986, when his story “A Crime Worthy of Respect” was published in Baghdad’s *The Word* magazine. On that particular occasion he was saved by a cabinet government minister who was himself quite fond of the story and had once been given a tour around Paris by Nassir in his own very unique way. One of the departmental heads at the Ministry of Culture took it in the neck, a man who was a great admirer of and connoisseur of literature, and who has since been hastened into retirement because it was he who approved the printing of the story. To this day, the honest old man says that it was a personal honour for him and that given a second chance, he would act in the very same way again. This story never managed to find its way into any of the collections published in the author’s motherland, either.

Nassir often stresses that the best stories he has written cannot be published. In spite of this, he somehow succeeds, publishing them in literary magazines in other Arab countries and in Arabic language newspapers based in Europe. Two of his stories were first published in Serbian and then only later in Arabic.

This was the case with his story “Charlie Chaplin’s Last Film”, the atmosphere of which has been compared by some of our writers to the atmosphere in some of Bora Stanković’s pieces.⁴⁵ Once, while among a group of close associates, the author described how that story set off along its uncertain path. Having finished writing it and typing up in June 1989, he rushed to show his friend, the writer Hazal al-Majidi, only asking of him that he return it within the next couple of days, since he did not have a second copy. The same evening, about an hour after midnight, Majidi, who resided on the other side of Baghdad, a city which at that time numbered four million residents, was to be found frantically banging on Nassir’s front door. His hands were shaking as he handed him back the papers, urgently issuing a demand for a glass of anything strong and insisting that there was no way he would keep *that sort of thing* under his own roof until the morning. At the precise moment when, having finished reading, he made the link between the end of the story and its title, despite its camouflage, which came in the form of the word “last”, he recognised in it Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator*, he felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up in fear. He jumped into his car and, fear-

⁴⁵ Published in the Kraljevo journal *Charter*, vol. 1-2/1997.

ful of the police on night patrol who could be just sitting, waiting to pounce, he hurried to rid himself of that damned “film” dominated by descriptions of specific techniques for skyrocketing through the party ranks.

This scene repeated itself in detail with the famous writer Mahmoud al-Jindari. This, however, did not put the stubborn Nassir off his intention of publishing the story. It was only much later that he received the news that the story had been accepted by a renowned magazine from another Arab country.

Above all else, this anecdote about the nocturnal hastiness of some of Iraq’s literary masters in aiming to save both their homes and themselves from an inconceivable danger which threatened them by merely “possessing” such a text for a few hours, from midnight through to the morning, indicates to us the mental state in which these people exist, about what type of thoughts run through their minds concerning the following day when they kiss their children goodnight and how they make ends meet, whether they live solely by their pen, like the writer of “Charlie Chaplin’s Last Film”, or whether this is aside from their main calling in life, as is the case with the wry veterinarian Hazal al-Majidi, who is himself not a person who can be frightened with ease, writing in one of his poems:

Our sky over here is black.

But they tell me it’s blue, over there with you. Is this true? (etc.)

This poem was published in a Lebanese magazine and read in the autumn of 1995 at the Iraqi Writers’ Guild, on the occasion of one of the literary evenings dedicated to poems and prose miniatures deemed “unsuitable for publication” ,since nobody had wanted to print them in Baghdad. The organiser, coordinator and host of these evenings was none other than Nassir!

One series consisting of six of Nassir’s prose miniatures was rejected during 1993 and 1994 by all Iraqi magazines and newspapers, with the explanation being that one of them (*The Remains of the Night*) could lead to the newspaper being “misinterpreted” as a pamphlet directed against the incumbent head of state. The writer, as far as he was concerned, refused to give up – he wrote it precisely so that it could be “misinterpreted”. Having first published the whole series in Cairo, the tireless Nassir managed to have this miniature included in a collection which had already been announced by the Iraqi state publisher in 1996 as going under the title of *70 Very Short Stories*, only to suddenly be renamed, just as it was literally about to go to print, to *The Remains of the Night*, with the subtitle *71 Very Short Stories!* This was met by a backlash full of cynicism: the author was

appointed as one of the censors at the Ministry of Culture, and was indirectly informed that this was an appointment which one could not refuse.

Working in such surroundings, Iraqi writers developed their own, specific way of expressing themselves. This was acted out in the form of a unique and seemingly innocent game, something which resembled *cops and robbers*. Most of the fun was to be had in Baghdad's Harun al-Rashid Street, in ever-packed Hasan Ajami's coffeehouse, an establishment which was held in higher esteem by all species of Iraqi writer than any of the more official societies or clubs.

Before being offered to any of the newspapers or journals, all of the "dangerous" stories, poems and plays, even excerpts from novels, too, were read out loud upon this clamorous stage, with periodic intermissions for the interpretation of the turbid political allusions. In such instances they would put away their dominoes and backgammon sets, everybody would receive a new glass of sweet tea and the writer would clear his throat, the hubbub settling down as he began to read. Immediately a chain for feedback was established: listeners in a particular place would let out a drawn out sigh, call out questions and add in their own comments. At some of the especially interesting points, sheer pandemonium would break out. Moments of ironic and comic brilliance would be rewarded with roaring laughter and applause, which for listeners from any other Arab state would be entirely baffling, because all of this bitter humour was derived from local codes and "familiarisms". When the reading came to a close, the discussion and interpretation promptly began amongst smaller groups. Editors and publishers would come here to listen, occasionally reading their own texts, too. Even the official censors were not disinclined from whiling away a few hours here – in fact, it would not be an overstatement to say that they do half of their job here. Moreover, they are actually welcome – to elicit an open response, be that a threat (that they cannot in any way defend a particular work in front of the supreme ideologists) or more commonly practical advice on how to get around the many pitfalls (although there are also those who make a point of not getting involved, waiting to have their own five minutes of self-important glory later on). Having started with the "milder" pieces, the hors d'œuvre, the salon's gathered guests were finally served the texts which were in every way, shape and form inappropriate for publishing – an expression which has long since established itself in Iraqi literary circles, and also in other Arab countries.

As the repression increased, so, too, at the same time did this phenomenon gather pace: there were more and more hidden places which had to be interpreted in

advance here, at the informal seances. When it was a particularly successful text in question, full of fearsome and opaque allusions, the noise would immediately reverberate throughout the town. They would then move on from such a story or poem, apparently innocuous, and it would be published in a literary periodical or daily newspaper, the public already knowing in advance “what the poet wanted to say”, and so the text was read in this manner, delighting its audience with every detail and thereby finding some sort of solace.

It was in this way that these stories and poems, difficult to understand even for a reader familiar with the local culture, achieved their political engagement. The wise authorities deemed it necessary to tolerate just about this level of obstruction from intellectual circles. It is understood that such texts cannot be rendered comprehensible to readers on the other side of the world without a great deal of effort, which is best exemplified in Nassir’s story *Hasan Ajami’s Coffeehouse*, which is accompanied by a simply staggering quantity of commentary notes. The logical question as to why Iraqi writers work through the prism of allegories and local specificities to such a great degree is, of course, unnecessary for everybody who is able to, and wants to, make sense of where precisely their many years of isolation from the rest of the world are leading them, and the possible question as to whether such a degree of self-censorship is necessary borders on discourtesy when taken in the context of what, in practise, phrases such as “the darkness ate him” and “judgement without a court” actually mean.

The Arabian coffeehouse has, over many centuries, been the “workplace” of professional storytellers who faithfully carry on the oral tradition and, also, give “performances” to the public in the form of their own dramatisations of popular epics. Ever since the authorities put a padlock on door of the Iraqi Writers’ Guild’s clubhouse, at the start of the 1980s, Hasan Ajami’s coffeehouse has adopted an even more important role, full of guests morning, noon and night, who in this or that way all deal with culture, turning it into the final oasis of freethought in today’s Iraq. This ancient and shoddy *café*, though indeed a place full of individual charm, belongs without a shadow of doubt amongst the landmarks of Baghdad. Crossing its threshold and spending time amongst its ranks in the autumn of 1994, the eminent Serbian jazz musician Miša Blam announced that he would love to perform there one day.

Nassir fiercely responds to the sycophancy which is no less widespread amongst Arab writers than anywhere else. He himself says that this is how he atones for a one or two plaudits from yesteryear which he is not ashamed of but rather de-

tests. To this very day, people speak about what he did at a three-hour assembly of writers, which had been summoned in the autumn of 1979 by the new leader so that he might be informed firsthand about the problems faced by authors. All of the other registered speakers cautiously maintained a discourse focussing on certain technical and financial difficulties, but Nassir stood up, demanded to be allowed to speak and uttered that which they were all fully aware of but had not wanted to say out loud. He addressed the head of state as “Mr President”, without paying heed to the prompts coming from all of those who were frantically trying to instruct him to address him by the prescribed title *seyyidī* (a word which radiates a warm sense of the nation’s love, since it contains allusions towards the vocative form of the word “master”) or at least by sticking to protocol with “Your Excellency the President” – until Saddam Hussein himself said “Let Abdull Sattar speak, he can address me however he pleases”. Nassir then boldly pointed out the essential problems facing culture, linked primarily with the freedom of creativity, the abject material and legal circumstances for writers and the poverty blighting the publishing industry.

In his concluding and final speech, while giving the authors those terribly necessary guidelines (which was the reason for summoning them in the first place), His Excellency the President attached next to Nassir’s authorial name and vocation the moniker *the brilliant*, but at the same time clearly cautioned these foremost sons and daughters of their proud fatherland that the freedom of the writer must be measured against the aims of the revolution, the progressiveness of which cannot, and must not, be cast into doubt. The writer, bitterly disappointed by this answer but certainly not impervious to his own vanity, accepted the verbal gift from the throne as a verified critical judgement of his own work.⁴⁶

With regards to Nassir’s political outlook, as an avowed detester of totalitarianism he does not subscribe to radical change which occurs overnight. He abhors every act of violence, but dreams about all manner of changes and often expresses his belief that the ideology of the preservation of the Islamic spirit pushed the man of Islamic faith towards the path of confusing the concepts of life – into a dark gloom and a still darker long-term deprivation.

⁴⁶ The simple fact is that within the given tradition and environment, this title does not stand out as much as it would somewhere else. In all honesty, many other talented Iraqi writers, amongst whom Nassir can count many true friends, envy his title, which manages to be both flattering and childish, a title which since that day has been inseparable from his name every time it appears in association with one of his books, stories or interviews.

Nassir is also the author of two novels, a number of plays for the theatre, television screenplays and about ten short novels for children. He was the first recipient of the prize for a text at the pan-Arab television drama festival held during the 1980s in Beirut. The drama was filmed and shown in many Arab countries. It was never, however, shown on Iraqi television. For some stories he received awards which would be totally unimaginable in the so-called western world, where literary prizes are institutionalised and public, subject to the judgement of a guild, and reached through the joint decisions of juries.⁴⁷

Nassir's more important books:

The Belated Wish (1969);

I Loved that Sun (novel, 1971);

Bird of Truth (1974);

A Short Biography of Sharif Nadir (1975);

Please Don't Steal the Rose (1978);

Once and For All (1979);

The epistolary novels *A Man's Love Letters* and *A Woman's Love Letters* (both 1984);

Love by Firing at Each Other (1985);

Rain Woman (1987);

The Woman in the Post Office (1990);

The Night of the Salep (one-act play, 1994);

The Remains of the Night - 71 Very Short Stories (1996).

⁴⁷ It was in this way that on two occasions, following orders from above, he received a luxury car. My notes about that which follows are a little jumbled and I no longer know whether it was for the "war" story "He Who Was Born Twice" (published in Serbia in the journal *The Word*, vol. 19/1996) or for a different one, but nevertheless, on one occasion he was summoned to the highest of places where he was offered a choice: did he want an apartment in Paris or would he rather have an around-the-world aeroplane ticket with \$10,000 pocket money. Being a formidable traveller and gambler, Nassir chose the latter; going via Belgrade, Budapest and Paris before arriving in Casablanca, from where he hurriedly returned home, borrowing \$100 for the journey, since he had already squandered all of his money on the roulette table. He claims not to regret what happened, although in recent years, forbidden from leaving the country and suffering a pervasive destitution, he has come to think that he could have acted more wisely back then. He always likes to point out that the countless reproaches and defamations directed against his stories are, in his opinion, the greatest prizes which he has received and the only ones which he was fully entitled to.

The last collection of prose which Nassir released in his own country was called *The Country That I'm From* (Baghdad, 1999). It came out when he was already no longer in Iraq, nor did he dare to return there, and copies were selling out in a matter of days, until the authorities decided to confiscate it, as word went around that the author had emigrated. Browsing the Internet, it is possible to see that during the last three years he has released fourteen new books in Amman, Beirut and Cairo, including the novels *A Half of Sorrow* and *Abu al-Rish*, the collections of short stories *After the Horse Has Already Bolted*, *The Predator* (containing a narrative which makes clear allusions to the head of state – a book in which, finally, *Hasan Ajami's Coffeehouse* is to be found), *Selected Stories* and *In the Fish Train*, the collection of plays *The Republic of Spinsters*, a book of literary criticism *Suk al-Saraj* and a collection of autobiographical reminiscences *My Life Through My Stories*. Here in Serbia a large collection of his narrative opus, entitled *The Happiest Man in the World*, has been in the process of *going to press* for the last few years or so, as they like put it. In the meantime, the publishing house has gone bankrupt and it is hard to foresee either when or where it will be released.⁴⁸

Since his first appearance in our country's literary periodicals, Nassir has been invited to the Belgrade International Writers Meeting on three occasions, but never managed to attend any of them because his writings were deemed too critical both for the authorities of his own country and the influential circles of the Iraqi opposition abroad. In the autumn of 1994, when he was again prevented from coming, he crossed the Jordanian border with his fourth wife, the author Hadiya Hussein (who had herself just been given the lucrative first prize for her collection of stories at a competition for female writers in the United Arab Emirates), and to this day lives in Amman, from where he sends out his numerous contributions, mostly criticism and polemical texts, to various Arabic newspapers and magazines across the globe, waiting for his immigration procedure to Canada to be completed.

The responsibility for preventing the pair from arriving at the meeting, where they would have lessened the splendour of the reception which the local establishment had laid out for two of their fellow-poets who had been sent to Belgrade (one of whom was the new Deputy Minister for Culture in Iraq), because they are well known to our reading public, was zealously undertaken by these colleagues

⁴⁸ Since I originally wrote this, the book has now been released by the Belgrade publishers Geopoetika.

themselves, with the appropriate help, of course, from the *authorised institutions*. Moreover, these two were cordially awaited by representatives of The Society of Iraqi-Yugoslav Friendship, an organisation whose leading figures, by invitation of the Iraqi state and from instructions originating from the *highest places* in their own country, travelled to Baghdad in 1995 (while Nassir was writing *Hasan Ajami's Coffeehouse*) so that through their presence they would – in the eyes of the sceptical international community – lend credibility to the electoral victory of the incumbent head of the Iraqi state, who had picked up 99.98% of the popular vote.⁴⁹

The old-fashioned Baghdad coffeehouse Hasan Ajami's is still in the same place where it has always been. Until the American occupation in 2003, it was constantly full of guests from morning until midnight, sipping tea or coffee, gambling small amounts on dominoes and, in some way or another, participating in culture. Abdul Sattar Nassir, for a long time the biggest figure on that scene and the defiant organiser of literary evenings based around the theme of “unsuitable for publishing” (an expression which has, in fact, become the *terminus technicus* within the majority of Arab literatures, given the nature of their regimes), will not be appearing there for a long time, and it is quite possible that he will never set foot there again. On the contrary, there is hope that, at last, Nassir will finally find a publisher for a collection which he has built in the greatest secrecy, without any form of self-censorship, entitled – *Unsuitable for Publishing*.

Zemun, 2000 / Belgrade, 2004.

⁴⁹ Nassir later wrote two stories inspired by this aforementioned referendum, “Rukabi's Shirt” and “The Predator”. He was unable to publish them while in his native Iraq. Upon emigrating, he announced in his first interview that he is still to publish his very best material. Since then, he has burned all of his bridges concerning a possible return to his homeland, having in a short period of time released a number of texts against the regime in Baghdad, both in the domestic press in Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt, and in Arabic publications in London. He recently wrote to me that he is currently working on a new novel which will categorically show the despotic regime in its true light, adding that it may even be the final one he ever writes. Knowing full well how much Nassir is devoted to life and how intensely he lives it, and how sacrosanct the word is for him, I understand by this that he is saying that he will not give up his plan even though he expects his personal liquidation to be the Predator's punishment for it. All that remains is for us to hope that such a day will never come.

A Note about the Author

Adil Kamil (1947) is an Iraqi artist, art critic and writer. He writes quickly and with ease, but holds onto the principles of the earlier Surrealists who did not make adjustments to a text, so his prose often does not reach the level demanded by the momentum of his themes and the sharpness of his perception. He has released eight collections of short stories and one novel. He is as thin as a stick because he has avoided eating ever since his early youth, except for dry-roasted chickpeas and a little yogurt – ingredients which in the Middle East are traditionally consumed as accompaniments to generously poured portions of araq, a drink which is well known for turning white when diluted with water and resembles milk as well. During the 1990s he edited the cultural section of the newspaper *Iraq*. His story “The City of Silence” was published 13 March 1995 in the Baghdad daily *Jumhūriyyah (Republic)*, resulting in the dismissal of the publication’s cultural editor, the writer Hadiya Hussein, a few days later.

A Note about the Author

The journalist and author Hadiya Hussein was first a news presenter on Baghdad television. It is not entirely clear when she was born. In the first census carried out by the revolutionary government following the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958, as part of its path towards building a new and better society, the new authorities decided that tens of thousands of Iraqi children not listed in the civil registry would all be given the same date of birth, 1 July 1952, if they were born in the first half of that decade. As such, Hadiya Hussein is one of those who has this date listed in her personal documents; however, she points out that she began going to school in 1962, which means that at that point she would have had to have been six years old. For a long time, she served as the editor of the cultural section in *Jumhūriyyah*, from where she was eventually fired in 1995 after publishing a story called “The City of Silence” by the writer Adil Kamil. For several years she edited the cultural section of the popular journal ‘*alif-bā*’ (*A-B*). In the autumn of 1999, upon receiving first prize in a pan-Arab competition held in the United Arab Emirates, a contest which searched for the best collection of short stories by a female writer, she emigrated from Iraq with her husband, the well-known writer Abdul Sattar Nassir. Since then she has resided in Jordan.

Hadiya Hussein writes with a light and fresh language and in a style which Arab critics mostly judge as recognisably *female*. In her short stories, which overlap the realms of reality and fantasy, she mostly deals with the problems faced by contemporary women in Iraqi urban environments, relatively liberal in comparison to the typical substratum of Arab-Islamic society witnessed in the provinces, and certainly when considered against the social norms of Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Her collections of short stories are well known: *I Apologise in Your Name* (1996), *The Man in the Cup* (1997) and *Right Beside Me* (1998), from which this story is taken. As the work was to be published, the printing had to be halted due to the censors expressing concern that one of the stories, “The Blizzard”, was defeatist, directed against the righteous war efforts of the Iraqi nation and that, as such, it should be deemed a public disturbance. Time and a little friendly cajoling of authority figures, over numer-

ous cups of lime tea in the famed *Hasan Ajami's* coffeehouse, eventually did the trick, the book finally being released two years later without any changes whatsoever. The collection of stories which won Hadiya Hussein the prize in the United Arab Emirates in 2000 is called *And That's Another Problem* and was reissued in Amman in 2002. Since the author emigrated, she has published the novel *The Inn's Daughters* (Amman, 2001) and the collections *The Archer* (Amman, 2000), *Everything Is As It Should Be* (Amman, 2002) and *After Love* (Amman, 2003).

Zemun 2001 / Belgrade 2004.

The Fantasy of Harsh Satire

The books of Zakariyya Tamir (Damascus, 1931) are not found in the majority of bookshops throughout the Arab world: the sharp edge of this Damascene's satires, a sabre forged by a master's devoted hand, are difficult to endure, cutting right into the heart of a harsh reality, clearly revealing the morbid nature of the despotic structure which stretches the whole length of society's scale. Instead, it is much easier to find them on both covert and open lists of outlawed books. From the point of view of the customs authorities in most Arab states, his books are forbidden goods. In his youth, Tamir got somewhat carried away with Communist ideology and, although he never sought to enter into the sphere of practical politics, the turmoil within the country brought him a familiarity with prison and torture. He knows the secrets which make the already wearisome life of a common man even more arduous and the misery of the poor from the periphery – a world out of whose bowels he emerged – even more tragic. For him, sometimes via a shortcut, other times all the way around, but inevitably they can all be eventually traced back to the same source: the organisation of governmental and ideological violence. Behind every single act of aggression stand interests and intentions justified by beliefs, and the majority of beliefs are based upon prejudices and society's institutions of all varieties and levels. Therefore, there is no institution which he will not attack, nor is there any authority, secular or spiritual, which he will not thump with his heavy fist.

No other Arab writer has managed to acquire such a reputation in such a short period of time as Tamir, nor to have caused so much envy purely through his free and original style of writing. His influence on young Arab writers is enormous, however nobody else has reached either his succinctness or form, and that is not even to begin to speak about the sharpness of his satire. His homeland's government wisely, but with great displeasure, chose to put up with him: they were pleased when he went for a "temporary work stay" in Riyadh and then to stay permanently in London, where he writes for British-Arab newspapers, and to this day the government tries its hardest not to take notice of his writing.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Contrary to this, the Baghdad regime reacted immediately, and actually threw Abdul Sattar Nassir straight into solitary confinement in prison, when in 1975,

Even though Tamir has written an enormous number of satirical stories and commentary in newspapers, his literary opus is not extensive when only individual books are taken into account.

He released the following collections of stories: *The Neighing of the White Steed* (1960); *Spring in the Ashes* (1963); *Why the River Fell Silent* (1973) - a set of stories for children; *Damascus on Fire* (1973); *Tigers on the Tenth Day* (1977); *The Rose Said to the Swallow* (1977) - another set of stories for children; *Noah's Summons* (1994); *We Will Laugh* (1998); *Sour Grapes* (2000). Alongside this, countless illustrated books for children, each of them featuring one of his stories, were published in Arabic and a number of similar editions were published in English translations by UNESCO. At the end of 2000, two of Tamir's books were released in Serbia, whilst a further three are in preparation.

Zemun, 2001.

A Note about the Author

Fakhri Qaawar is the best known Jordanian writer and has for many years been the president of the Jordanian Writer's Union. His first collection of short stories was released in 1972. He is decidedly oriented towards the left-wing and his works have been widely translated into the languages of former Eastern Bloc countries. He was born into a Christian family; however, this has brought about bitter accusations of blasphemy from the body of the clergy in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Israel, and some readers who have felt particularly offended have even advocated the writer's excommunication from the church.

His most important books:

Why Susie Burst into Tears;

Chess Is Forbidden – from which this story comes;

I Am the Patriarch;

Barrel;

The Birds' Homeland;

The Palestinian Job;

The Night Watchman's Dream.

Salwa Bakr – solace and protests

The Egyptian author Salwa Bakr (Cairo, 1949) waived her promising career in the civil service and, already with a master's degree in economics to her name, returned to university so as to graduate in theatre studies. From this, she went on to write theatre and film reviews for many years. From 1985 onwards, she completely devoted herself to literary work and the battle for women's rights. Her works exude a sharp criticism of a society in which hundreds of thousands of large families live in dingy cellar rooms in big cities and in tiny hovels in the countryside, suffering from bilharzia, hunger and thirst, whilst at the same time a narrow sliver live in the greatest decadence and extravagance.⁵¹

Although her books have received attention from critics and have a sizeable readership across the length and breadth of the Arab World, they find themselves on an unofficial blacklist and as such are not to be found in many of Cairo's bookshops. The author has herself on multiple occasions been exposed to public attacks and threats from conservative and right-wing forces. She also has a following outside of the Arab world, her books having been translated into a number of languages. As such, the news of her arrest – allegedly regarding the release of her story "Off Flew the Little Birdie" – immediately travelled around the world when, not long after the work's publication, she was ordered to come to the police station for a so-called informative conversation concerning her participation in some union activity.

In spite of their brutal realism, the works of Salwa Bakr contain a humour which serves as a constant substratum to her satirical mastery. The sharpness of this satire, finely woven into the text, is unfalteringly directed against the rigidly hier-

⁵¹ Amid Cairo's fifteen million inhabitants lives an entire city of between one and two million people, known as the *City of the Dead*. Here, amongst the dead souls in the vaults of the large city cemetery, alongside the bones of those interred either long ago or just recently, under the spectral light of candles and oil lamps (sometimes electricity is siphoned off nearby lampposts), not only do they reside but also cook, marry, work, sing, pray, grow up and die. The owners of these family graves still use them to inter their dead – albeit after having come to some form of agreement with the squatters.

archical bureaucratic system and, at the same time, against the ideological basis of Arab-Islamic society according to which women are merely servants to men – not only is a woman not equal to a man in the context of traditions and customary law, nor in most Arab countries is she an equal in the eyes of civil law.

The majority of Salwa Bakr's heroes are women. However, it is actions which take on primary importance. Characters are sketched – only a few of them are modelled with a vivid plasticity – and appear for the most part just so that they might seek their dark goals and unachievable desires. Even a historical figure, as is the case with the main character in her newest two volume novel, the 9th century Coptic rebel Bashmuri (from a time when Cairo was born as a suburban settlement of Fustat, the old capital of the already mostly Arab province of Misr, and when the Baghdad caliphs from the Abbasid Dynasty were at the very height of their power), remains hazy until the very end of the story – for the purpose of the story itself.⁵²

Part of Salwa Bakr's popularity lies in her being a counterforce to the conservative voices which challenge her work because they feel threatened by it. Her stories – as the name of the writer herself suggests – are a solace to many unfortunate people, particularly Arab women (who are her most devoted readers), eager for at least somebody to remember them and point out their suffering and misery.

Seeking to always present the importance of the constant battle for liberation from all forms of oppression, and enthusiastic about the writings of the great stylist and magician of the Arabic language, the Syrian Zakariyya Tamir, Salwa Bakr wrote the story "How the Peasant Woman Kneads Her Dough", in which, paraphrasing Tamir's highly regarded story "Tigers on the Tenth Day", she metaphorically shows the way in which the state functions, and society as a whole. And whilst Tamir's caged tiger becomes as meek as a lamb at the cynical hands of its trainer, amongst the protagonists of Salwa Bakr's story it is precisely the "hero" – the monkey whose quintessential nature is similar to his trainer's – who refuses obedience, surprisingly, in order to get the best deal. This bitter and cruel allegory of the government caused many negative reactions, just like Tamir's

⁵² This novel came under fierce attack from followers of conservative Islamic thought because it treats the Arab settlement of Egypt in the 7th century as an occupation. Secondly, a no less sharp joint attack came from the Islamic and Coptic clergies, since the novel describes a pact made between the Coptic Church and the conquering forces in defence of the privileges held by the church and its clergy in the face of danger coming from a national uprising.

story a decade earlier, to which Salwa Bakr responded in many interviews by saying that “now is not the time to write stories exclusively for entertainment”.

The conversation between the robbers concerning their decidedly thin pickings after looting the bus in “The Little Birdie Flew Off” is also very much in this spirit. Here it is once again (*italics S.L.*):

“Scum! They’re filth, the lot of them! *What a shithole of a country we live in when this is the breed of passengers we’ve got!*”

“This great big bus, full to the brim, and they’ve got no more than sixty-eight pounds between them! What a load of shit! It’s as though someone else had already done them over before we even showed up.”

“*Well, they must have been bigger thieves than us... the biggest of all. The ones who only play for big stakes! Ha! Ha! Ha!*”

This *Ha! Ha! Ha!* echoed through Egypt for months after the story’s first appearance and confirmed Salwa Bakr’s reputation as a free writer amongst both her readers and admirers.

Her most important works:

Zaynat at the President’s Funeral, short stories (1986);

Atiya’s Tomb, novel and short stories (1986);

About the Soul Which Was Gradually Stolen, short stories (1989);

The Golden Chariot Won’t Ascend to the Heavens, novel (1991);

How the Peasant Woman Kneads Her Dough, short stories (1992);

Description of the Nightingale, novel (1993);

Al-Bashmuri - The Story of All Stories, novel (Part 1 1998, Part 2 2000).

This little selection of forbidden or in many other ways censured and harshly criticised stories from contemporary Arab writers from the “middle generation” should, according to my initial thought, bear the terse title 12. The reason for this was not just that it is composed of twelve primary “entries” (without taking into account the essayistic notes that support these stories – whilst they are in some respect “entries”, they are not independent but rather *support*), but also that such a title manages to tickle everybody’s curiosity because it is enigmatic in a concise and ethereal way. I believed that this coded title, should it gain the favour of readers, especially those inclined towards numerology, and maybe even political esotericism, could produce a favourable marketing effect, which on its own would allow for these Arabic stories and their writers to reach a wider audience and offer them the recognition which they undeniably deserve. I adamantly believe that this line of reasoning is not without a firm grounding, the number twelve being an apostolic and contiguous number, a symbolic form of time and the feminine principle. It is also one of the perfect numbers which in Eastern mysticism and theory of numbers are attributed formidable powers.

Considerable powers had likewise been attributed to all of these “dangerous” stories containing a grim image of the times, since darkneses are scared to death when faced with their own image in the mirror and because tyrants know that people who read just for the relish of reading inevitably see apostles of faith in the light and humanity in their authors, almost just as clearly as the tyrants themselves see it.

That which comes after twelve is a secret and a taboo. The Anglo-Saxons, who still count in dozens and whose hotels never have a room 13, still to this day believe this just as strongly as the Babylonians once did, and they are not alone in this. Far from it! There can hardly be a single person who has not at some point felt a desire to believe in such things. The majority of us, therefore, would say that twelve stories is a full measure. And there are umpteen reasons for this.

First and foremost, the time of devoting oneself to reading great big thick books is already something which belongs to the past. It is far and away more pleas-

ant to take on a nice little thin book containing just a few interesting stories. On the other hand, although there are more than a few rebellious Arab writers, it has to be admitted that not many of them are virtuosos when it comes to writing short stories, while opportunities for them to get such works published in well respected magazines and books are just as unattainable. As such, it is not easy to find truly brilliant Arabic stories which are resolutely against totalitarian regimes in general and the ruling despotic clans and individuals in particular. In any case, what I had in mind was that by means of the forbidden substance flowing from the pens of prose authors who are trained to write from right to left, I should complete those first twelve in the set of the natural numbers, to present the taboo words (and thoughts) of one part of the Orient in an unobtrusive (ideal?) quantity which suggests fullness and, possibly, the beginning of the end of an era.

I then thought that the book could just as well be called *13* because my notes are themselves a story as well. With the very emphasis of the *forbidden sign* like a flag in the form of the title, attractively framed in an arabesque design on the book's front cover, the collection of "unacceptable" stories would become more consistent in as much as would be even more provocative.

Thus, it seems to be just one further step to the comfortable thought that the book could actually be entitled with any number. In fact, why is it not called *14*, *17* or *20*? Such randomness could produce an even stronger effect of enigmatic lure – and this does not even begin to speak about the advantages of the noble number *24*! (As the majority of people know, twenty-four is twice as strong as twelve, this being the reason why the various nations of Central Asia and the Levant took it as the mark of utmost purity for gold, as well as the experience of exceptional delight, both physical and spiritual). Finally, there are many more numbers that hide their own peculiarities, interesting stories and even whole legends of mathematical sorcery within themselves.

However, the number of units in a book must be formed first as a function of the concept and the content which is on offer – all other ways are false. My concept (even though I was not initially aware of it) understood that all stories, no matter whether they contain elements of magical realism, whether they do not play with esoteric visions, should be of the kind which goes against the grain of authority, but also that they should speak neither of the influence of the stars nor of the secret meanings of numbers.

Thus, it was more logical to seek my title in the world of words. Finally, what number of stories will eventually enter into a collection is not, on a practical level, just a case of the editor outlining what he wants (and less still the translator, whose entire activity is suspicious *per definitionem*, even if these two figures are united in the body of one person), but rather most of all the decision comes from those who initially consider the project, then accept it and, when push comes to shove, are ready to risk money on it (be that someone else's or, by God, their own).

In my attempt to imagine a publisher who might be interested in this collection of *problematic* stories, as it were *impossible* stories, I gave the number twelve featured in the title one of those seemingly disagreeable adjectives, but actually one which is straight to the point, no longer taking into consideration the real number of stories which would be in the book. Once the reader believes in the declaration of the amount on the front page, no deviation from the state of facts will induce him to accept that state as the actual one – in the worst case scenario he will notice those facts quickly and then forget them just as quickly, and the book will still keep its title.

We all know what the inevitable outcome of the battle between an established belief and the knowledge of facts is.

When, as was expected, the powerful number 12 (supported by the colloquial tone depicted in the genitive plural of the adjective *impossible* in Serbo-Croatian positioned so as to designate human beings)⁵³ prevailed, by its own quality, over all quantitative perplexities, there remained only to perform one more overview of the content of this small but ferocious book, so as to present something which alongside a great deal of optimism may perhaps be called *the personal poetics of translation*.

These stories were translated over a period of twelve years as I came across them (more or less in the same order in which they are to be found in the collection). Arabic translators do not get sent mainstream hits by publishing houses, but

⁵³ At the same time, this brings us to think about famous titles such as *12 Angry Men*, *Seven Samurai*, *The Dirty Dozen* and perhaps *The Untouchables*, etc. Here though, we are concerned with twelve heroic stories rather than with that number of heroic writer characters, which in this case is actually only nine, hailing from seven Arab countries – two more members from the set of excellent numbers charged with symbolism.

rather must themselves show persistence and dedication in the hunt for good stories. Always with a fresh sense of hope, you start (and quickly cease) reading countless poor stories and, on top of this, read around twenty or so mediocre works all the way through, until eventually you come across one which you consider worthy of the effort associated with the translation and which is likely to subsequently bring joy to its readers.⁵⁴

I have always insisted upon only recognising the authority of the text, not the authority of whichever name is printed either above or below it. All of the stories in this collection are the gems of short prose. Some of them flowed from the pens of very well-known writers, but almost half of them were written by people who did not experience fame in any way, be it a blessing or a curse, or maybe even both, even though these stories would suggest that they deserved at least some of it.

Some of these stories were found in magazines and newspapers. Squeezing through the sieve of censorship much like a camel through the eye of a needle, they were a cause for the break-up of editorial boards, the removal of editors, the public banning of books (if, of course, they had even managed to get in any of them in the first place), the imprisonment of authors or their placement on secret black lists. The careful reader will notice that the lives and fates of some authors mix with one another in several of this collection's stories.

Sometimes, noticed the common man long ago, even the blind hen can still find the grain. But none of the Arab writers whose stories we read here should be looked upon as a blind hen. Some of them are lions (who can be easily recognised by their claws, such as Tamir and Nassir), some are wolves and she-wolves and some are "old dogs". Some, it could be said, are just strutting cockerels who cry

⁵⁴ Taking everything into account, this is a consequence of the state of contemporary Arabic prose, the genre structure of which does not have autochthonous roots. Arabs write in a language which has both a lexicon and a grammar greatly different from their spoken vernaculars. Thus, many who master this language believe that it forces them to write with one eye focussed on the West (Europe, Russia, and America) and the other on their celebrated classics, marked by mass imitation, cordial narration and an unbearable dose of well-intentioned explication. The writer thus comprehensively interprets every suggested emotion of his characters. The exception to this can be seen in different "symbolists" and "modernists" through their willingly undertaken mission, as they considerably refrain from the elaboration of such details; however, it is often impossible to draw any sense of meaning from their texts.

out a couple of cock-a-doodle-dos (like Ajami), but just abandon their blind work when threatened by the police's stew pot.

And let them just be themselves. It is better to have released a single good story rather than one hundred mediocre ones.

All of these writers are, in some respect, poets who celebrate prosaic expression, but they do not forget that, with their words, they celebrate above all else the human freedom beneath the insane oppression of absolutist regimes and an ancient but cruel social tradition which conceited eurocentrism is all too willing to dismiss as backwards Asian despotism.

It is not a miracle, therefore, that none of the authors found in this collection are academics, or diplomats, or even professors of literature. One was a blacksmith's journeyman, another a television presenter, one a teacher, another a painter, and one other even had a PhD in Occupational Safety at work. Some, as is often said, *studied*. The majority, however, are self-taught, because they learned the writer's trade – which, by the way, is not officially deemed a trade at all – exclusively by reading and, filled with a joyful anxiety, writing that which they desired somebody else who is also brave would have written.

They did not need to go to school for this, nor get diplomas, nor even to have previously gained a high literary reputation. Their stories serve as their literary diplomas. The majority of Arab writers who have already cemented their reputations are willing to touch on “social topics”, but all of them wisely fall silent, or fell silent, for the whole of their lives when faced with the most horrible crimes of domestic tyrants.⁵⁵ Maybe they did this precisely because of their cemented reputations and too much schooling?

The writers of most stories in this collection belong to a different breed. They are the type who shout out “Down with schools!”. In *The Devil's Dictionary*, next to the entry for “Man,” the nutty Ambrose Bierce wrote: “An animal so lost in rapturous contemplation of what he thinks he is as to overlook what he indubitably ought to be”, and under “erudition” he put: “Dust shaken out of a book into an empty skull”, whilst he did not even consider the word “school” to be worthy of

⁵⁵ So this collection of stories is lacking the most illustrious names from the canon of Arabic literature: Khalil Gibran, Naguib Mahfouz, Mahmoud Taymur, Tawfiq Al-Hakim, Yusuf Idris – all excellent writers who enjoyed the state footing the bill for the printing of their collected works, which make whole mountains of books.

an entry. Truth, it seems, is more commonly found when one strays from the beaten track. The method by which these writers achieved their schooling can be best expressed in the saying “nobody has ever learned anything which he has not learned by himself”, and their most important lessons were undertaken when they had a hunger in their bellies, their books were banned, their jobs taken away from them or they were cast into prison without a trial. And the cementing of their reputations rests as much in the shock they elicit in their Arab readers that somebody would even dare to write such things as it does in the quality of the works.

Translating these stories, I could not resist the desire to say a few words about the circumstances in which they were created and existed, but not just about places, dates of birth and the other main works by the authors. How to deliver these jewels to readers, who for the most part have not even heard of their creators, and not tell them those other sparkling *stories about stories* which simply flutter beneath their titles?! That is why I outfitted them, wherever I could, not only with the necessary, standard props but also with those other *stories from the background*, believing that the reader will gladly play with such material, and that they would otherwise remain less remarkable than they deserve to be.

I constructed these notes in much the same way as I read them and recognised inside me the stories themselves and their fates. Some are extensive and fall into the sphere of the essay, while others are very short, in some respect even quite barren, it might be said. This does not contribute to a sense of balance, but it does impartially bear witness concerning the various possibilities of presentation dependent upon the moment and level of awareness about events and the potential projections which a literary work, however short, can have in the real world – and also on its path into this world.

Translating is one of those acts in which the two aspects of our being, language and thought/feeling, are most consistently matched and equalised. I will not credit anybody else with the praise for this little thought in an attempt to gain greater credence for it, rather I shall modestly accept the credit for it myself: translating is *pure esotericism*. Reading translations, people often feel, but in no way recognise, that this is how it is. For this reason, alongside some of these translations, it was necessary to talk about the act of translating itself. Whoever wishes can easily skip over these parts; but whoever is just as interested in this aspect as in the stories themselves will perhaps find more enjoyment on these

supplementary pages than in a game of whist at the seaside, or in playing blitz chess against a well-matched opponent, or in an empty crossword. I hope that this is possible.

Those who persuaded me to collect these works (which I did not actually do with these stories, or perhaps only in part) will not bear the responsibility. It lies with me and, of course, with my publisher, who by some miracle was found (it is said that miracles can happen and, judging by this case, that is true). The synopsis which has been adopted offered a series of twelve pictures. However, it would be a sin to miss this chance, with the help of this current additional number (very, very cunningly labelled with its Latin name *Post scriptum*), to break through the boundary and enter into the dark domain of the forbidden and hence already thrilling number 13.

And you are all free to think and believe whatever you wish.

Zemun, August 2000 / Srpko Leštarić

Belgrade, March 2004.

*AUTHOR, TITLE AND SOURCE OF THE STORIES
INCLUDED IN THIS COLLECTION*

- عبد الله حكيم: ملحق للتقرير الوارد عن المدعو علي بن علوان. مجلة "الأقلام"، بغداد، عدد ١٩٧٨/٦
- إدريس الصغير: مصادرة صوت السيد فلادي. مجلة "الأقلام"، بغداد، عدد ١٩٨٠/١٢
- محمد مسعود العجمي: وتنبت الجياد... سنابل. مجلة "البيان"، الكويت، عدد ١٩٨٤/٢١٩
- عبد الستار ناصر: سيدنا الخليفة. مجلة "الموقف الأدبي"، دمشق، عدد ١٩٧٥/٩
- عبد الستار ناصر: مقهى حسن عجمي. مجموعة "الكواش"، عمان ٢٠٠٠
- عادل كامل: مدينة الصمت. جريدة "الجمهورية"، بغداد، ١٩٩٥/٣/١٨
- هدية حسين: عاصفة الثلج. مجموعة "قاب قوسين منى"، بغداد ١٩٩٨
- زكريا تامر: بيت كثير الغرف. مجموعة "سنضحك"، بيروت ١٩٩٨
- زكريا تامر: الأجر. مجموعة "الحصرم"، بيروت ٢٠٠٠
- فخري قعوار: شجرة معرفة الخير والشر. مجموعة "حلم حارس ليلى"، بيروت ١٩٩٣
- سلوى بكر: عجيبين الفلاحة. مجموعة "عجيبين الفلاحة"، القاهرة ١٩٩٢
- سلوى بكر: شال الحمام. مجموعة "عجيبين الفلاحة"، القاهرة ١٩٩٢



ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Srpko Leštarić

is a prolific translator from Arabic into Serbian, renowned for his faithful and fine artistic works. He has won the prestigious Miloš N. Djurić award for literary translation in Serbia.

Over the past two decades, Leštarić has dedicated much effort to collecting, translating and presenting authentic Arab folk literature.

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This short selection of forbidden, censored or harshly criticised stories by contemporary Arab writers of the “middle generation” represents in the best possible way not only the tradition of storytelling, but also the culture of rebellion and dissent that has long been part of Arab societies.

The stories were collected, selected and translated over a period of twelve years as the Serbian editor and translator Srpko Leštarić came across them, and are accompanied by masterful descriptions about the fate of the authors, their texts, and the art of translating from Arabic.

