

NEW VOICES OF ARABIA
THE SHORT STORIES

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The Short Stories

An Anthology from Saudi Arabia



Edited by
Abdulaziz Al-Sebail and Anthony Calderbank

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Acknowledgements

In February 2008, I was part of a media delegation invited to visit Argentina. On the plane flying from Madrid to Buenos Aires, the head of the delegation gave each of us a small diplomatic bag as gifts to be given to Argentinean officials. Opening the surprisingly light bag, I found two small books in Spanish with the aim of introducing them to Saudi culture. It was then that the idea of having anthologies that introduce our literature to the world in all languages was born.

This book would not have been possible without the support of the Ministry of Culture and Information, first to the Minister, His Excellency Dr Abdulaziz Khawjah, and to all who contributed to the project. My gratitude goes to the panel that selected the writers, and to Dr Saad Al-Bazei, who offered invaluable assistance and support at all stages of the project, Dr Mohammad Habibi, poet Ahmad Al-Mulla, Dr Hasan Al-Nemi, Dr Mujeb Al-Adwani and writer Jubair Al-Mulaihan. I would also like to thank the editors of the anthologies, Dr Saad Al-Bazei, Dr Abdulaziz Al-Sebail and Anthony Calderbank, for their efforts and contributions.

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Yousef Al-Mohaimeed
Director of Dar Al-Mufradah Publishers

Foreword

The function of artistic creativity extends beyond merely conveying aesthetic experience. It provides evidence of people's cultures, and also demonstrates the power of language through many different styles of literature. This literature expresses people's concerns, needs and how they interact with their environments.

These anthologies of poetry and short stories are rendered in a widely known international language in order to present Saudi culture to the world. This is intended to strengthen the mutual human, artistic and civil ties with the international community. Such relations stem from the belief that artistic creativity is one efficient method for human communication.

These collections present a selection of poets and short-story writers of different generations, artistic orientations and social classes in Saudi Arabia. The selection is meant to reflect the diversity of the forms that the poets and story writers use as well as the literary schools to which they belong. It thus aims to clearly portray the level of innovation and progress that these art forms have undergone in the kingdom in recent decades.

Therefore, these anthologies are considered a significant contribution to cultural dialogue among nations. Their contribution lies in depicting human emotions and actions pertaining to Saudi culture, thus providing an image of the Saudi experience and stripping away many stereotypical views and preconceptions. This is in keeping with the Saudi leadership's initiative in supporting international cultural tolerance and religious dialogue. King Abdullah ibn Abdulaziz has led this initiative in order to bring people together, encourage understanding and promote tolerance. This dialogue began locally within the kingdom, after which it progressed to the wider Islamic world to include all Muslim nations. After that, the Saudi call for tolerance and dialogue grew to include the rest of the international community until it was adopted and supported by the United Nations.

The Ministry of Culture and Information would like to thank Dar Al-Mufradah Publishers, which has led this project, for their organized

and methodical efforts in bringing about these anthologies in a timely manner.

Nasser Al-Hujelan
Deputy Minister for Cultural Affairs
Ministry of Culture and Information
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Introduction

The Arabian Peninsula lies in the southwestern corner of Asia, lapped on its three sides by the bountiful waters of the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea and the Gulf. It is, today, made up of seven states – Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Yemen, Qatar, Oman and the United Arab Emirates. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia occupies four-fifths of the area of the Arabian Peninsula.

The historical experiences of the Saudi Kingdom's different regions are, given the size of the country, markedly different. The western and eastern parts fell under the influence of different states, as a result of their strategic position and resources, respectively. The interior (the Nejd), meanwhile, was ruled by local emirs who competed against each other to increase the size of their emirates. One of the most prominent of these emirates was that of the House of Saud, which succeeded in taking control of most of the Arabian Peninsula to form what was known as the First Saudi State. However, the Ottomans brought about its downfall when it resisted the emirs' influence. It was, though, successfully re-established as the Second Saudi State for a period of several decades, before disagreement between the Saud brothers gave another emirate the opportunity to bring it down.

In 1901 one of the members of the Saud family, Abdul-Aziz bin Abdul Rahman, who would later be known as Ibn Saud, began to reform the kingdom of his forefathers. In 1932 he successfully united the different parts of the region under the name 'The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia'. This state became known as the Modern Saudi State.



Records of the literary history of the region date back to the fifth century AD. Poetry was the dominant literary form for a number of centuries, and although narrative literature can be found throughout the history of the region, it did not occupy a significant position in the region's literature.

At the end of the nineteenth century, when translation started to become more widespread throughout the Arab world, the Arabs found

themselves drawn to two new types of narrative writing – the novel and the short story. At the start of the twentieth century, Arab writers adopted Western narrative forms and began to write narrative works, which passed through various phases before reaching maturity. The Western model of narrative writing became hegemonic, with only a few exceptional examples of writing inspired by old Arabic forms.

The Arabian Peninsula, of which Saudi Arabia forms the greater part, was not, owing to its geographical location and its historical circumstances, in direct contact with the West, but it was in contact with Arab regions of creative importance, specifically Egypt and the Levant.

Examining the art of the short story, we find that there is a direct link between it and the presence of the press. It was mainly the influence of the press that brought about the evolution of the short story from the novel and its emergence as a narrative form. This link is not unique to the Arabian Peninsula or the Arab World – it can also be found in Europe and America. The press, in which serial novels had previously been published, started to commission shorter pieces that were better suited to the space available. This was one of the reasons for the emergence of the short story as an independent art form.

The press first appeared in the Arabian Peninsula at the end of the nineteenth century, gaining prominence in many regions at the beginning of the twentieth century. Although it began with strong links to political power, focusing on official news, it later began to orient itself towards cultural – and particularly literary – affairs.

The beginnings of the short story in the region came in the form of articles, often dealing with social issues, and demonstrating a desire to bring about the widespread reform of social conditions. The short story did not, therefore, have remotely artistic roots. It was, in fact, rooted in social reform, in that short stories were, to begin with, written in the form of narrative articles dealing with a range of social issues. It was only in the 1940s that serious concern for the artistic style of the stories started to develop.

After the Second World War, newspapers and magazines started to take a keener interest in cultural affairs. They published a great number of stories, including – and this was a new departure – many which were translated from French, English, Russian and other languages. The names of Maupassant, Somerset Maugham, Chekhov and others could often be found in newspapers throughout the 1940s and 1950s.

During the 1960s the Arab region underwent cultural, social and political changes. Many countries gained independence, having been liberated

from colonial control. The depth of the impact of these events varied but they all contributed to the transformation of human experience across the region, where a great number of issues to do with society and nationhood emerged. The region became more connected in educational, cultural and intellectual terms to the other parts of the Arab world than it had been before.

The short story emerged in Saudi Arabia in the 1940s in response to Saudi society's need for reform, not as an art form. However, it was in the 1960s that the form reached maturity through the interaction between Saudi short-story writers and Arab writers with more experience of the form. Saudi writers came into direct contact with other Arab writers when they travelled to Arab countries for academic purposes, but there was also indirect interaction through the translations of international writers that were published in local newspapers.

In the second half of the 1970s we see that one of the paths along which the short story progresses is a continuation of its previous stage: a traditional structure, based essentially on narrative and with no tendency towards the use of other techniques. Stories of this type focused on social issues, principally through realist representation, without a complex artistic vision.

The alternative path followed by the short story represented a trend that was directly linked to the developments undergone by the short story at the beginning of the 1970s in some of the Arab countries with longer experience of the form. The story started to move away from the representation of social reality, instead beginning to focus on moments of extreme emotion and psychological experience. There was also a shift in the use of language, with a movement away from the literal and towards the symbolic and multi-layered.

This development in writing style and approach was brought about by a number of factors, including an increased consciousness of and sensitivity to what was happening in neighbouring countries, and the economic changes that the region suddenly underwent, which were difficult to comprehend. These changes resulted from increased oil production and the significant rise in oil prices in the mid-1970s, which had enormous economic and social repercussions and brought about great changes in people's lives. These changes became one of the topics that the short story focused on most.

Some writers were directly interested in social change and its profound impact on society. They charted the change from the village to the city and from nomadic life to settled, urban life, and the nature of the transforma-

tion of values and morals. Sometimes the subject was approached largely through documentary realism. Many writers pursued this line, notably Ibrahim Al-Nasser, a faithful adherent to the art of narrative and a leading figure in short-story writing, to which he dedicated half a century of his life. Some writers, on the other hand, turned to 'critical realism' to track the changes occurring in society – changes that took on numerous dimensions that went beyond merely describing and documenting real life – to give perspectives on the faults of society and the mistakes being made in it.

One of the most significant consequences of these social changes was the feeling of alienation experienced by those who could not comprehend the changes that society was undergoing and which therefore had a negative impact on their lives. This strong sense of alienation was felt by those unable to adapt to the new society, preoccupied as it was with material things and appearances and divested of many of its traditional values. Thus by the end of the 1970s and into the 1980s alienation and nostalgia for the past had become significant themes in the Saudi short story.

The theme was not just one of social alienation, however, but also cultural alienation, as intellectuals wanted change but sensed the presence of a great gulf between them and the rest of society. It was a world taken over by materialism, in which a person's value lay in what he possessed, not in what he knew or what he could do for society. The feeling of disconnection with the past also manifested itself, as the increased production of oil, the abundance of money and the increase in individual income brought about numerous social changes. The financial boom led to many people leaving their old homes for modern houses. Their eating habits, their family relationships and their social behaviour changed. This was followed by the abandonment of many of the values that had formed the basis of society, particularly those related to cohesion, belonging, neighbourliness and mutual cooperation. Their place was taken by materialism and egotism. This change was not gradual, either, which would have made it easier to adjust to. Instead it occurred in a relatively short space of time and caused an upheaval in social interaction, particularly in the educated class, which was keenly aware of such concerns and which came to feel considerably alienated because of its inability to adapt to the new reality.

In addition to social and cultural alienation was a sense of ideological alienation. Educated persons' reformist ideas and political views appeared to society around them strange and idealistic, forcing them to retreat into themselves and away from society. Some of the first short-story writers to take up the theme and tackle it to varying degrees of success were Jarallah Al-Humaid, Hussain Ali Hussain, Mohammad Alwan, Hassan Al-Nemi

and Abdullah Bakhishwin.

In the 1980s, short-story writers, male and female, numbered only a few dozen, but by the beginning of the twenty-first century they were in their hundreds. Some of those writers have only a single collection to their name, while others have produced dozens. The subject matter they dealt with was unlimited and the artistic ambition of their stories also varied greatly. While some writers tended towards a straightforward narrative, seeking to give their stories a plot with a purpose or moral, others approached the story as a linguistic expression based on self-revelation and self-expression.

In the last decade of the twentieth century many authors brought the modernist approach to the fore in Saudi literature through its various forms of expression. The surge coincided with a boom in narrative writing, and a large group of male and female short-story writers emerged who no longer wrote in the traditional form, with events and characters portrayed through a realistic narrative, but sought instead a denser language approaching the more suggestive language of poetry. But this modernist form of writing differed from one author to another. While some writers followed the narrative methodology of short-story writing, many saw the form as open to experimentation. For many the short story meant a small number of pages, leading to stories free of action and events and focused instead on snatches of life and character confession. For some writers, stream of consciousness became the favoured narrative method.

Some of the works in this collection would be difficult to classify strictly as belonging to the short-story form. While they are certainly literary writings of limited words, they do not adhere to the techniques of the short story. Although the short story can be regarded as 'an elusive art', it is the presence of action and events, a limited number of characters, a narrative and other techniques such as dialogue, recollection and internal monologue, that make a brief literary work a short story.

It could be said that most of these writers are writing their stories from real-life experience without being versed in the rules of short-story writing, and that this is why many fail to develop their writing styles. They produce works written at different times but which do not differ in artistic ambition. Perhaps the abundant production of some writers without a similarly copious critical response has led to the writings of some authors remaining at the same level, with no development of their artistic and writing techniques.

One feature worth highlighting is that a number of writers who contributed notably to the artistic maturing of the short story in the 1960s, such

as Ibrahim Al-Nasser and Abdullah Jifri, also wrote novels. Some writers from the 1980s and 1990s began with short stories before moving on to the novel, and for writers such as Ahmad Al-Dwaihi, Umaimah Al-Khamis, Badriyah Al-Beshr, Zainab Hifni, Abdulhafiz Al-Shammri, Abdulaziz Mashri, Abdullah Al-Ta'ezi and Laila Al-Ahaideb, the short story lost its interest, as if 'the short story represents the product of youth, while the novel is the product of experience'. Abdo Khal, Yousef Al-Mohaimeed and Raja Alem, meanwhile, achieved success beyond their homeland into the wider Arab world and beyond through translations of some of their works into various languages, earning them distinguished awards. The novel has given writers a significant cultural and media presence, something which the short story has not been able to do.

Despite the number of short-story writers of both sexes today running into the hundreds, literary circles in Saudi Arabia, as in other countries, are concerned with the question of the future of the short story and whether it will remain capable of retaining a significant literary status or if it will fade away in the face of the greater narrative art of the novel. If the short story evolved from the novel, will it, one wonders, return to its origin, its sun to set once and for all?

Women's writing has stood out particularly over the last two decades for two reasons: the first is the increase in the number of women writers on the literary scene – a number that the selections here are unable to do justice to – and the second is the move away from the traditional social themes and portrayals of women's lives and tribulations as working women, or wives, or job seekers in a male-dominated society, to more daring themes. Now no subject is untouchable. While Saudi society may appear conservative and traditional to the outside, many writings, and particularly those by women, have laid bare numerous hidden features of the life of society and shattered social and religious taboos, with the works of Zainab Hifni a fine example of this. Social issues have been dealt with in relation to the degree to which they have crossed the lines set by the censorship system for published material, or those that the writer has imagined based on personal experience of the political and social situation. The treatment of issues with ethnic, political and ideological dimensions has, meanwhile, varied greatly depending on the writer and the exact period. That is because political and social circumstances, and the freedoms permitted to writers, have varied over time. Many of those freedoms and constraints may in fact be unwritten, the product of individual writers and publishers' interpretation. Indeed, it is apparent that social censorship is more powerful and influential than official state

censorship, and that it can sometimes become state censorship because of the power of social influence. Changing circumstances in Saudi Arabia have led to significant variations in the level of censorship, and the way in which short stories have dealt with many subjects has differed according to those circumstances, ranging from open declaration to allusion. Subject matter itself has also varied, sometimes focusing on social issues, sometimes tending towards political topics.

With the start of the twenty-first century and the proliferation and increased diversity of the media, freedom of expression has become unlimited, and state authorities have been unable to curb those freedoms. Some writers addressing sensitive topics have taken to publishing their books abroad, but the censors have also become more flexible than before. Politics, sex and religion are the three most sensitive topics, but the sheer number of literary works tackling those themes has also served to considerably dampen that sensitivity, and what would not have been allowed to be published a decade ago is now regarded as par for the course. The room for expression is currently far greater than before, and short stories have emerged that are outstanding in both their approach and handling of big themes of patriotic, nationalistic and political dimensions.

The reader will, as a result, find a great deal of variation in the stories in this selection, both from an artistic point of view and in terms of how successfully they approach their subject matter. All of that serves, however, to give a good reflection of the reality of the short story in the kingdom.

Abdulaziz Al-Sebail

(Translated by Clem Naylor and Jon Rooney)

Abdo Khal

He was born in 1962 in Jazan, in the south of the kingdom. He has written a number of novels including *Cities Eating Grass*, *Immorality*, *The Mud*, *Death Passes from Here*, *Days Don't Hide Anyone* and *Barking*, as well as several collections of short stories and a collection of children's stories. His novel *Spewing Sparks as Big as Castles* won the 2010 International Prize for Arabic Fiction.

Plants of the deep

For four years, he hadn't changed the place where he sat. He had stayed facing the sea, staring at the horizon with a patience and anticipation that had gradually become exhausted. He had sat quite still, like a boat thrown up on the seashore, absorbing the waves, the seaweed and news of desolate harbours.

From afar you might think he was a rock hewn in the shape of a curled up man, with a head suspended in the distance. But at sunset you would discover that the rock was nothing other than someone who had chosen to nail himself every day to this desolate part of the city waterfront, passed over by the wind, the sea spray and the cries of the seagulls that circled around the smell.

From there he could see in the distance waves, sails and boats, as well as fish and fishermen. The sun would set in the distance, and nothing would come to disturb the soul.

He would leave his house as the day grew hotter, and behind him an old woman would pour out her imprecations, for at that time of day there were few feet heading for the sea. He would take advantage of the absence of fishermen and street sellers to steal quickly along beside the sea towards the north, passing the fishermen's boats that were scattered near the waves' loose tongues. His mind trickled with hope and his heart warmed to it. He would snatch hasty glances at the passers-by, hurrying quickly and doubtfully on, and if he saw someone coming his way, he would slow down and stand there like someone who wanted to collect the sea shells that lay all along the coast. He would walk well away from the paths of those passers-by, and when he was clear of their narrow eyes and swarthy faces he would take out a small bag of wheat from his pocket and start to scatter the grains to the birds that filled the area. He never took a backwards glance no matter what happened, and he never reached his place until late afternoon, when the seagulls congregated. He would join them silently, his eyes darting on the horizon, his patience and anticipation now exhausted. When he saw the sun committing its daily suicide and burying its disk in the distance, he would get up from his seat and go back where he had come from, to be swallowed up by the narrow lanes in the heart of the quarter.

In the house she greets him eagerly as she gropes his tall body. In a dried out, yearning voice that had not grown fainter over twenty-five years, she repeats again her familiar lament: 'Bishr!'

He hugs her gently towards him, then returns her to the place that she has grown as used to as her own smell. The words stick in her throat, so she can do nothing but burst into tears and mumble painfully: 'Don't despair. He'll come back!'

In the distant past, as a small boy, he had not known the secret of these constantly flowing tears which left her pale eyes empty of anything except a never ending movement. He could hear her crying in the depths of night. When he was a little older she would rest his head in her lap whenever he asked her about his father, and tell him that he would come later: she said that he would come down to them one evening through a hole, and she would never cease to point out the openings set in the ceilings of the rooms. He thought that this story and its effects would cease when he grew up, for he imagined that it was a story woven to bring sleep to her constantly open eyes. (This actually became a habit of his own, even when he had grown into a man of thirty, for he continued to sleep with his eyes open.) But the story never lost its shine for all those years and was never forgotten by this woman whose eyes had turned pale from shedding so many tears.

One day, while he was repairing the house, she flew into the sort of a rage that he had never seen before and swore that she would leave him the house and go wandering if he didn't leave these holes as they were – the holes that she had kept in the ceiling of every room in the house.

'Have you forgotten that your father is coming back to us through them?' she would shout at him.

So as not to make her angry, he left them open to the wind and the rain. As soon as the rainy season set in, the house would turn into a series of swamps that could only be drained with great difficulty. He found it hard to convince her to drain the stagnant rainwater, as she insisted on keeping it, muttering 'I can smell the smell of your father in it!'

So he would give in, and leave the stagnant rainwater, not daring to drain it until it turned brackish and attracted the mosquitoes and insects. Only then would she come to him and say: 'Your father will not be coming this season, so drain the water!'

Every year, the rainy season would come and go, leaving behind it the dream that had grown old in the memory of that woman. She had never despaired of her husband's return. He had gone out one night and not come back. Before disappearing, he had told her that he had seen a powerful eagle carry him off and circle with him in the sky before dropping him into the dark and distant sea. The following night, while she was sleeping, she had felt something moving around her, and the ceiling of the room

split open to reveal her husband suspended in space like an enormous bird beating its wings furiously in the direction of the sea. She thought she was dreaming so she shut her eyes and carried on sleeping, but when she woke she found part of the ceiling of her room split open and could not find her husband.

She told how she had wandered the earth looking for him and only come back home when an old man had told her that her husband would come back one night the same way he had left. He advised her to leave her house open and to make supper for him every evening, for when he appeared he would be as hungry as if he had never eaten in his life.

She would tell this story every day in his hearing till he was convinced that her mind had been eaten up by madness and left her as a burden for him to bear as one of his daily chores. So he went along with her whims, only occasionally grumbling at her or rebelling at her strange behaviour. Every evening she would go around the holes and gaze at them for several minutes, carrying a long sheet to hide her husband's nakedness when he appeared, for she swore that he would appear naked as she saw him every day in her dreams. She had never stopped doing this ever since her husband had left the house. She apologized to her son for sleeping so much, saying:

'He insists that I should spend as much time with him as possible. Don't blame me, for you don't know your father. He is very stern, and woe betide anyone who makes him angry! And I don't want to make him angry!'

At this, the son would shrug his shoulders, swearing under his breath, and leave her to curse him for not believing her. Sometimes she would take hold of him and reprimand him: 'Do you think your mother's mad? Yes, I can read it in your eyes. Tell me, don't be afraid!'

When she found that he said nothing, and that his eyes were darting in all directions, she would leave him with her finger wagging in his face, and her voice ringing out in a tone of profound certainty: 'He will come. Every night I see him. Then you will be sorry and will seek my forgiveness, but will not find it!'

In the past, she would use clay pots to collect the rainwater that had poured through the holes in the rooms of the house. She would use them to water a piece of ground she had prepared for the purpose, and whenever a plant sprang up she would think it was him. She had sworn that he would grow like a banana tree and would emerge from the skin of a fruit, then fly up to the sky and come back the same way he had left. But she was continually disappointed, for as soon as the plant shot up from the ground

a little, it would wither and wilt, and all her attempts to make it grow straight again came to nothing. This only changed when she discovered that donkeys were urinating on that piece of ground, at which point she resorted to preparing every room in the house for nurturing the banana seed. It was a strange house: ceilings with holes in them, a floor like a seed bed, and a woman carrying a sheet around every night, expecting to have to hide a man's nakedness.

Usually he would leave her while she was still in an extremely agitated state, shouting: 'He will come. Every night I see him. Then you will be sorry and will seek my forgiveness, but will not find it!'



I usually stayed in the café on the shore where the fishermen came, scattering themselves here and there, with no conversation except of the sea and its adventures. Some of them would use the time to patch their nets or repair their sailing boats that had been chewed by the deep sea winds. Meanwhile, the café became a place for games, laughter and the drinking of tea, though most people were simply happy to sit and regurgitate old tales.

They didn't like to fish near the town, so you would find them sailing off in groups towards Sudan or Ethiopia, where they would cast their nets near to the coast, together with their hopes and their sorrow-laden songs, and wait for whatever the sea might throw at them.

They say that my father had a melodious voice which would stir even the laziest fisherman to leap up and pull in his nets, and he would join the fishermen in their songs.

No one sat in this café unless he had some connection with the sea: fisherman, boat builder, fish seller or whatever. I would never have enjoyed any position in the place had I not been the son of a sailor and fisherman, the like of whom the sea had never produced before (so they said), for he knew all its hidden secrets. Many of them would not believe that my father could have been swallowed up by the sea – swallowed up like the flabby bodies devoured by the waters, then slung to the surface when the sea tires of them, to float on the surface and be carried off by birds. They thought it more likely that he simply tired of this city that attracts strangers as it sleeps – strangers who were turning the sea into swamps and ponds for fancy fish, while the city did nothing to preserve its dignity. Because he was a sailor of the old school, they thought, he had grown tired of this attitude and left the city for the oceans where the sea was still youthful and vigorous.

Every day I would sit in this café, sipping glasses of tea as I listened to wondrous tales of fishermen's adventures. Then, as sunset approached, I would go back home to find my mother still whispering of her husband's life.

A few days ago a Sudanese fisherman came. He enjoyed a warm welcome and the respect of all, as tales, songs and the smell of the sea poured out everywhere. I was sitting near him, and from time to time he stole a glance, looking at me closely. I could see his tall turban piled on his head like a solid mountain of cotton, a perfect match for his thick trimmed beard flecked with pure white. His eyes shone brightly with a darting glance; they seemed to be able to cut through the person they were looking at, so much so that I felt that he was roaming through my mind. His repeated looks made me feel uncomfortable and I was on the point of leaving when the eldest fisherman's voice made me stand up and go across to him, moving over to where he was sitting with the Sudanese sailor on his right hand. As I stood in front of them he said to him: 'This is the son of Captain Husayn al-Mu'alla.'

He stretched out his hand for me to shake with exaggerated courtesy, and I felt embarrassed as I returned his greeting. His eyes ate into my face as he mumbled: 'How is your father?'

The old fisherman shuffled in his seat and gave him a disapproving look. 'Didn't you know that he went missing, sir?'

He paid no attention to him, but sunk his eyes further into my face, still smiling his gleaming white smile. 'And is your mother still waiting for him?' he asked me unexpectedly.

I started, and nodded my head. 'Don't go, I want to talk to you!' he went on.

Some of the fishermen cleared a space for me between them, and I sat there expectantly, as he went on telling some of his adventures with the sea. After the gathering had broken up, and only the older fishermen were left, he excused himself, took me to one side and started to talk to me in a kindly way. First of all, he told me to treat my mother well. 'Be kind to her!' he said.

'But she never tires of repeating the story of my father, who went off such a long time ago,' I replied.

'He will come back,' he replied confidently, in a way that made me tremble inside.

'Do you know something about him?'

He said nothing, though his eyes continued to look at me doubtfully. Then he asked, in a hesitant tone: 'Would you like to see him now?'

I was extremely doubtful about this man, and the welcome that the fishermen had given him, so I replied mechanically: 'I think he died a long time ago.'

He gave a shadowy smile, but made no comment on what I had just said. He took an empty tea glass, poured some water into it, raised it to his mouth and then started to mumble over it as he brought it close to my eyes. I could see a man sitting in a boat, slowly and expertly spinning a sail. He was painfully thin. I looked in astonishment, only waking to the voice of the Sudanese sailor saying: 'This is your father. Wait for him! He will come back from the sea just as he went to it. But if you do not wait for him, he will not come!'

'When will he come?' I asked eagerly.

'This is a piece of knowledge that I cannot read, but he will come.'

Then, before starting to move, he added: 'Be careful not to be late in meeting him, for he will need you when he arrives.'

He got up, stretching out his hand towards me, and pressed my hand affectionately, before rushing off along the road with his tall frame. Before he had gone any distance he turned around to offer me both advice and a warning:

'You should wait for him at every sunset. Be careful not to be late for any reason. If you do not keep the appointment, then from one of the holes a withered bird will fall into the house, which will be your father's soul. So be careful not to be late, and take care that no one sees you. Understood?'

He had disturbed me, so I shouted back to him: 'And where should I wait for him?'

'Where the stars of Ursa Minor shine,' he replied, directing his words behind him.

I was not satisfied with his reply, so I started running after him. He turned round, and with an angry look on his face said: 'Don't follow me, you have heard enough!'

His words were sharp and his looks hostile, so I obeyed his instructions and gave up following him. For his part he continued to walk quickly towards the sea, as the older fishermen waved their hands to him in farewell.

From that day on, I have gone out every day to wait for the arrival of my father.



I pulled myself together as far as possible, in order to get up and head for that distant spot on the shore. But I was stopped by a wretched feeling of

nausea. My mother had made numerous attempts to silence the ringing that was growing inside me, turning into a violent headache that shook my whole being, but they had come to nothing. I could do nothing except clutch at my pillow and bury my head in it, while everything around me heaved this way and that, as it turned into circles that grew alternately wider and narrower, forcing me violently downwards.

I would try hard to get the better of this nausea, but my only connection with the earth was my mother's voice consoling me kindly: 'Pull yourself together, the time has come!'

I move far away from her, drowning in my nausea. I move away with it, taking a grip on myself so that she will not go. Then it pulls me and runs away with me like a whirlwind, and I am lost, lost in nothingness. Occasionally, at times I can only vaguely remember, I hear her telling me to get up. I struggle and struggle and drown in my nausea. I see a great sea, and I see my own body tossed back and forth on the waves, which are sometimes trying to digest it, sometimes spitting it out. I stumble and raise my head, rising up and up, moving a little away from the lower circles of nausea.

In the distance, her voice came back to me with the insistence of a heavy tambourine, sometimes lively and sometimes languid with grief. I felt her hand comb my hair and the smell of lemon scent from fish leaping beside my head. I started trying to grasp at her voice like a safety rope, while fish from the sea swam beside me. Suddenly, the fish abandoned me and my mother's voice changed.

'Look, there is a withered bird falling on us! Get up! Get up!'

The harder I tried to get up, the weaker I became as the circle of my nausea grew larger, and I saw my father swimming with difficulty towards the shore, buffeted by the waves and shouting. 'Help me! Help me!'

He was swallowed up by an enormous whirlpool and I saw him disappear, only for the ringing to return. My mother was trying to get me up, but the harder I tried, the worse my nausea became. I saw the sea hurling its waves and running through the streets, entering houses, dragging me towards a corpse that lay bloated on the surface, for me to snatch it and disappear with it into the depths.

Cage birds

I despise people that raise their voices at their wives, and this contempt increases as the words get closer to the bone.

‘I regard this action as a hideous crime!’

When a man disparages his wife in a public gathering, in the market-place or in the street, it becomes an unforgivable insult. When I hear something like that it makes me feel embarrassed, as if it was I that had done the foul deed, and when I hear voices like those disparaging their wives, it make me look for a piece of ground for my body to disappear into.

Men here are like barbers nonchalantly running the blades of their tongues over their wives’ skins. Even if they draw blood, none of them can be bothered to wipe it away with a soothing word of apology.

Women are like old towels which they slip into kitchens or locked rooms, to pour out their polluted stains on them in total secrecy.

When we (my wife and I, that is) are in the market place, I usually refrain from indulging a habit we have had since our marriage, for here the sight may arouse sarcastic laughter or suspicion, neither of which I find appealing. But every time we pack our bags to leave these skies, she totters in front of me like the first time I saw her, and gives me a wink. ‘We’ll indulge our habit when the plane lands, won’t we?’

I smile at her and bend my arm over my waist. She hurriedly buries her hand in the gap, grasping my arm with a childish happiness, and we walk along proudly like two lovers exhausted by separation. We wander through the rooms of the house and its winding corridors, each of them ending in a narrow chamber, then forget those damp narrow rooms, and invent a scene somewhere in the world. We walk on the shores, we shop, we make paper dreams fly, and all the time she is hanging on to my arm, as her small delights dance together, filling the space in the house with happiness, before fluttering down to earth.

‘Tomorrow I’ll do this!’

She is silent for a few moments and carries on waiting for the moment to pack our bags.

‘Isn’t it painful to live for a single month each year? A month that goes by like a money lender slinking around the alleys with a sponger’s foot-steps and an outcast’s greed?’

She looks at my white hair and the widening glow of a bald spot that has begun to spread, leaving behind a small furrow running between my thick hair, looking for an escape route that cannot be found. Hiding her

bitter sarcasm, she says: ‘When we came here, your hair was thick and jet black. The years don’t just eat away at our appearance, but they also feed on our expectations. We wait for everything, we wait to go back home, we wait for this month every year, and we wait for me to hold your arms in a public place. And we wait for the child that has refused to share this loneliness with us. Everything is waiting.’

A short silence, then her voice dropped to a crushed whisper: ‘Isn’t it sad that holding your arm should be a great dream that we wait to turn into reality once a year?’

Twenty years have passed since we buried ourselves in this flat. From this grave I go out to work every day. Every evening I come back and find that she has made herself up, danced with the chairs, perfumed the carpets with her feet, and hung a thousand wishes on the walls, with a thousand grumbles and a thousand tears.

As the key turns in the keyhole of the door, her feet will already have reached the opening that allows my body to enter, thrown herself at me, and kissed my forehead with passion.

‘Hi, how’s the outside world?’

I have often tried to push her away and told her off for doing this whenever I appear. The first time I told her off her eyes filled with tears: ‘Don’t you like me showing my feelings towards you?’

‘No, no, dear, it’s just that when I come back I’m dirty, and my body is giving off smells that I wouldn’t like to reach your nose.’

She laughed so much I thought she was going to play her old trick (which never varies) of throwing a cushion at me. ‘Oh, but everything about you is my very existence ... I love everything about you!’

After she said this I became embarrassed at my arrogance and started to embrace her when I came back from work, without worrying about the smells given off by my body – the result of humidity mixed with dust and car fumes.



My wife and I exchanged hostile glances. For a long time we had been accustomed to look at each other like that when we were totally exasperated. She would often pay no attention to me at all when the blood boiled in my veins; she would keep silent in the face of my sudden outbursts, and things would end in my leaving the house, cursing the hours that brought me together with her under the same roof.

After every furious look, her face would blaze up and she would fill her bedroom with tears for days, but without actually reproaching me.

She would perform all her duties in silence, with wet eyelashes, without responding to my apologies. Every time I thought up some ploy to soothe the harshness I had left inside her – leaving a rose in her bedroom, or a poem, or a small gift – she would come like a cooing dove and leave her body between my arms, quivering like a tree in autumn that had to shed most of its leaves to celebrate what remained of its greenness. Every time she would warn me gently: ‘Don’t scratch the jewel of the love that I bear for you!’

When she found that this sentence had not fulfilled its purpose she would stare at the tufts of my hair! ‘I’ve had enough of the loneliness we feel between these walls! Let’s just be like two cage birds. We have to live inside the cage, not outside it, and our life inside the cage means just you and me, you and me, we just sing and die!’

In this stifling social atmosphere we had no amusement except for walking along the Corniche sidewalk on Fridays. If I found that my constitution was in good shape we would visit one of the parks that spread out along the other sidewalk opposite, facing the dark, dust-coloured sea. Our day was full of stifling routine. I would go to work, and spend ten hours of my allotted life in my office, working continuously. When I saw the clock hands hovering over seven in the evening I would gather my papers together, bury them in the desk drawer and quickly leave. Straight away, I would have to face the night.

‘What can I do now?’ This question would pose itself on a daily basis. I would dream up various hypothetical scenarios to amuse myself, and before they had finished, the key would be turning in the keyhole. No sooner had the door opened than I would abandon the food I was carrying on the nearest table beside me, panting from climbing the twisting staircase with the high rises that made it hard to reach the top. I would feel annoyed when I spied her crouching in the corner of a room, staring deep into space. I would feel her annoyance and her silence would change into a burden thrown on to my own shoulders.

‘As usual, there is nothing to make this tedious person squatting like a guard dog melt ...’

She would jump up nimbly and head for the kitchen, and return carrying a glass of water, which I had drunk for twenty years, whether I needed it or not. Then she would make directly for the bags I had left on the table and search them to be sure that I had not forgotten any of the requests that she had slipped into my pocket before I went to work. She didn’t criticize me for stopping my habit of kissing her whenever I returned from work, and I didn’t want to reestablish a habit that had stopped two years or more

ago. Her silence stirred me and deadened me at the same time. Inside me, active dissatisfaction was wrestling with itself, emerging from within me like the steam of a volcano.

‘There is a better life!’

I would flee from the unease of the moment by going straight to the bathroom, by repeating mechanical questions to which I did not expect an answer and fantasizing about my hopes for another life.

An oppressive night and the scent of her heavy perfume, trying to escape from being totally drowned in an excessive humidity. It carries on wafting through the place without finding any escape, except by penetrating my nostrils. Whenever she embraces me in her arms, I almost choke; I throw off her arms and seek shelter with the closed window. A continuous stabbing sinks into my mind: ‘What has she done wrong? What has she done wrong?’

Out of the corner of my eye I catch sight of her in her place, her features downcast. What power we possess when we commit injustices. ‘I beg forgiveness, I don’t mean it. I just feel myself suffocating!’



‘I mean this perfume is choking me!’

She stood downcast in front of the wardrobe mirror, took a towel, and retreated into the bathroom. I could hear the water running and something like sobbing.

‘What can I do now?’

Four silent, lifeless rooms. If only there were neighbours to relieve our stagnation a little. This city does not welcome the exchange of visits. Yesterday I found a young boy trying to come up the staircase; I picked him up in my arms, kissed his cheeks. My feelings were ablaze as I hugged him to my breast. I fixed him in my bones. I felt his small hands clinging to my chest, pushing me away from him. I kissed him passionately, and the more he pushed me away from him I felt him making me bleed. A woman’s voice could be heard from inside the house: ‘Fetch your son!’

My neighbour grasped the state I was in and snatched his son from my arms, as the child cried in agony.

‘Did he hurt you?’

I tried to apologize but he gave me a blazing look: ‘Curse the father of whoever let you in to the country!’

I retreated inside, his curses penetrating deep inside me like a sharp, piercing sword blade. As usual, she was sitting on a chair opposite the television, her eyes fixed on the wall opposite. If only a child had arrived

in response to our wishes, it would have put an end to this daily tragedy. We had sought this child with all the money I had saved in this state of loneliness, spending it penny by penny in the accounts departments of private hospitals, spending many long days running here and there, but every time the child refused to come.

Her eyes were still fixed on the wall. I sat down beside her and she jumped up to bring a glass of water. She had taken off her make-up and perfume. She stood up to bring the glass of water while I let my head hang to the ground and left my tears to find their own way.

‘What’s the news?’

‘...’

‘Did they annoy you at work as usual?’

‘...’

‘My God, please stop crying, I can’t bear to see you like that.’

She hugged me to her breast, as she joined me in my bitter tears.

‘God, what’s the point of this loneliness?’



Today is Thursday.

Tonight we escape from our prison for a little. We were a group of friends that had got to know one another, and which included our wives. It had become a habit that everyone looked forward to every Thursday evening.

I had taken to finishing work early that day. I would leave work before six, planning a nice evening that would take us out of our state of boredom and put back some life into our veins.

When I arrived home I found that she had painted on her make-up with great care and put on her heavy perfume. I didn’t show any irritation, and she grinned from ear to ear: ‘Sarah has just arrived, and she will be coming with us!’

I hurried into the bathroom to run some water to wash away the grime that was sticking directly to my body, and as the water poured down, Sarah naturally captured my imagination. She was a woman in her thirties, to whom life had given a fullish figure and a never ending laugh. With her you felt that women were indeed mouth-watering roses – a tunnel to help you escape life’s dark streets.

I hurriedly finished getting myself ready and went out to the street to wait for the two of them to come down. I started the car, and over my body sprayed some gentle Parisian perfume, which spread languidly through the inside of the car. I checked that my hair and moustache were tidy, and

made sure I could catch Sarah's eye when she took the back seat by tilting the mirror a little.

She opened her door quickly and sat down straight away. Meanwhile, Sarah's hand reached out for the rear door, which she pulled gently towards herself, slipping her body into the far corner out of range of my eyes. Her 'good evening' had been like a tender song from the throat of a bewitching singer.

'Why do we suppose we think every woman beautiful except for our own wives?'

I was annoyed by my wife's perfume, for in an unequal contest the scent of my own body spray had lost to that heavy smell. It had stopped spreading beyond my clothes and skin, while her heavy perfume had begun to stretch its tentacles everywhere, spreading out like an elderly cat stretching its paws in every direction. It pressed on my chest and clogged the entrance to my lungs. Wanting to show how captivated with her I was in front of her friend, she asked:

'What do you think of my choice of dress?'

'...'

I didn't have the strength to reply, even though I could put an end to her long wait and rescue the situation with a short, hypocritical word.

'Didn't you hear, darling?'

'Eh, what are you talking about?'

Sometimes as we embark on a verbal battle with each other, I can feel the words sinking into her head, releasing the ghosts of the past for her to play with before slipping them back into her memory.

Her perfume pervades the place, dragging around its heavy steps, clogging the air in all four directions.

'Didn't I tell you that this perfume suffocates me, and that you should change it for a lighter perfume?'

This sentence escaped my lips without my noticing, like a giant storming a place, unleashing the storm winds to dislodge all the hidden dust in the universe. Sarah tried to stop the winds gathering pace and attempted to lighten the gloomy atmosphere: 'It's a nice perfume. I like the smell of it a lot ...!'

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her tears playing havoc with her make-up. A rattle in the throat that put paid to her stream of words stopped the tears from flowing.

Her hand stretched out to the door which she slammed shut. As she slipped into the entrance to the building, her body was shaking terribly, like a gazelle struck by a piercing arrow that lies down with its wounds in

the forest so as not to be seen by its killer.

A nasty surprise, as the woman who never tired of laughing changed into an electric current that stunned me from behind: 'I never imagined you could be so unpleasant!'

The door slammed shut, and she got out, staggering off in the opposite direction. The car engine was still running as I tried to find words that would let me climb the tall staircase steps.

How I wish now that I could find her standing at the door, pulling me to her breast and handing me the glass of water that I have been swallowing for twenty years whether I need it or not!

Translated by Paul Starkey

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The guardian of the old river

It is the remains of a river ... maybe.

It is a wadi – a channel for flood water ... maybe.

Everyone is waiting for water. And there is no water at all in that place.

The houses of the village are lined up waiting for it to come. Their faces overlook the channel.

The people of the village decided to keep the channel as it is.

Maybe the river will come. Maybe.

The channel crosses the village from north to south.

Some of those houses face the east, and the others the west.

The sun approaches the faces of the western houses when it rises and leaves the eastern houses when it sets.

Everything is clustered around the river – little stalls, seats that lovers use.

Crossings have been built to join the two banks for those who cannot walk straight across the channel.

There is no water flowing at all, but the river might come and do away with the dust of the banks. Maybe.

In the middle of the village, facing the channel, he made a house from scraps of wood, cotton and cloth.

Everyone knew him as 'The Man of the Flood'.

He welcomed the sunrise every morning by chasing away the cats and dogs, except his dog, his faithful friend. He cleared the channel of the rubbish left over from the gatherings of the previous night.

He got very angry whenever anyone disrespected the channel. He would say to them: 'The water is coming. This is the river of its source, which sins have buried.

The Man of the Flood was not a stranger to the village and its people.

It was said that his parents were swept away by a flood that destroyed their village deep in the south. Because he was so small, he floated on a plank of wood until he was picked up by the people of the village.

He saw that death came with that raging water. He was overcome with a fear that grew with him.

The water swept away everything that stood in its way and his parents were too weak to resist it. He saw the water carrying them off into the unknown, then he decided to wait for them. Maybe they would come back with another flood, or maybe a river ploughing its way through an old channel would carry them back.

He would wait for that torrent to come.

He would wait forever.

He would watch over this channel.

The channel of a river. Maybe.

The channel of a wadi. Maybe.

His black dog lies next to him. It is his companion. It watches over the channel when he sleeps at night.

The Man of the Flood does not sleep a lot and his dog does not sleep deeply. He listens closely, hoping to hear the torrent. It could come from the north or the south when the rain falls, and that happens rarely.

His heart beats fast. He asks the people of the tribe to stay away from the channel. When the rain stops and the little streams of water in that channel dry up, his heart nearly stops. He feels terribly sad.

He says to the people of the tribe: 'You have committed so many sins. They have turned into a heap of rocks and sand that has blocked the course of the water. When will all of the people of the village stop sinning?'

He wanders the alleyways of the village. He shouts: 'Repent. Wash yourselves with rainwater.'

One day he learnt that the people of the village had agreed to fill the channel up with earth, to bring together the east and the west. He did not sleep that night. He kept shouting at the top of his voice: 'What folly are these people going to commit?'

As he shouted, he looked happily towards the sky, which had started to cover over with clouds.

The sun hid itself far away to give way to the rain. It was said that no one in the village had ever known the like of it. Some of those who were well-versed in their history said that their region had not known rain like it for many, many years.

Some of the nomads said that the rain that had struck that village deep in the south and had swept away the Man of the Flood's parents was far weaker than this rain.

The Man of the Flood was over the moon – the channel was full of water.

It might turn into a river. Maybe.

The people of the village were afraid that the rain would sweep the Man of the Flood away.

They asked him to leave his flimsy, wretched tent and take shelter in one of the buildings overlooking the channel to the east or the west.

He refused, preferring to stay to welcome the first surge of water in the channel.

How he hoped that the water would come from the south, where he left his parents.

The rain was heavy and it was coming from all sides.

The channel filled up quickly and ran to the north.

It swept the rocks and sand away with it. It swept away the remains of the stalls and the lovers' seats. It swept away the wretched tent of the Man of the Flood.

Some of the men of the village forced him into one of the big houses. They changed his clothes, which had been soaked by the rain.

He stood on a balcony overlooking the river with some of the men. They watched the downpour and the torrent of water in the channel.

The Man of the Flood noticed some pieces of cloth being swept along by the water. He shouted: 'Father! Mother!'

He threw himself off the balcony and ran towards the channel.

They tried to catch up with him but he was faster than them.

They heard him shouting: 'Let me do it! You won't have to take the blame.'

His body disappeared into the torrent and the flood pulled him into oblivion with those pieces of cloth.

The water left the channel as the clouds dispersed and the sun came back to reassume its position of complete authority.

Everyone was very sad about 'The Man of the Flood, whom the flood had swept away', as they started to say.

They decided to keep the channel open. It would not be touched by the hand of change. It would not be filled up with earth. People's rubbish started to pile up. And the salesmen built their stalls again. And the lovers put new seats on either side of the channel.

The dogs and cats multiplied, and in the place where the remains of the Man of the Flood's house still lay, his dog ran to and fro, barking, continuing to guard the channel.

The remains of a river. Maybe.

The remains of a wadi ... Yes, that is it.

The salon

Scattered seats, scattered bodies, a story starts and does not end, a story ends before it starts. It is the salon in which faces meet for the first time and faces meet for the last time. I carry my body between those chairs, along those passageways. I hold tightly onto cups of tea and coffee. He might tell me about a story that I wrote, I might tell him about a story that I did not write.

I sit, two, three, four, all of them sit, some on the edges of the chairs and tables. 'How are you?' Some people say. Conversation does not go beyond 'How are you?' One of them sings, 'You are singing about how people are ...' How well people can talk about how they are.

Words start and end, the salon is a chest holding peoples who have perfected the arts of speaking and listening. I, meanwhile, look for my voice – it is discordant and the words it utters have neither rhythm nor rhyme. I spoke about a new poetic form; one of them interrupted to ask if I had filled it out. Another brought out a poem of a thousand lines, each made up of six to eight feet. The feet did not move in a rhythmical way and the salon's walls did not send back echoes.

Whenever my steps fell on the salon floor, I tried to be the one who was always reading, the one whose features were moulding to the shape of words harvested over years. It did not matter that some would know some of these words and some would know me and make me known to some of the others. I felt that being known by some was a way to be known by all. I was one of those not ready to know anyone, those who seemed like the floor of the salon, whose relations changed with every change in people's footsteps.

I asked a friend what the culture here was like. He said: 'Here there are only cultured people, even that waiter. When he brings cups of coffee and you ask him about the coffee itself, you will be surprised by an elaborate tale of its origins and literary history. When you ask about the relationship between culture and coffee, you will find that they have forever shared an unshakable bond.'

I summon my voice and ask for a cup of coffee. A collection of smiles surrounds me: 'You didn't ask us what we were drinking.' I ask them. Tea, coffee, cappuccino.

I am the man whose voice is heard, I am, and the salon is a silent witness to what is said and what is not said. In these moments I find that culture has as many faces as there are types of drink, food and flattery.

I look for someone I really know. I do not find anyone. No one in the hall really knows anyone.

I consider the salon ... I find myself alone in front of a cup of bitter coffee.

I drink down the bitterness.

I give in to my feet; they carry me towards a door, opening onto the sun and the rain.

The step dance

The men gathered in the village square and formed a circle. One put a drum down and started to beat a rhythm with two thin sticks, intoxicating the people of the village with music.

They danced.

He smiled and gold teeth bore witness to the joy.

In his soft voice, he bellowed, 'The night'.

The men stamped their feet on the ground, making a cloud of dust.

The men held the hands of a man who they surrounded that night.

They threw him into the middle.

They formed a circle around him.

They thudded over the ground. They spun to the right. And to the left.

He shrugged his shoulders threw his head up to the sky.

He lifted his hand towards the star hovering over his head.

In his soft voice, the drummer bellowed 'The night'.

Sweat poured from his body. He shrugged his shoulders and his head swayed, intoxicated by the voice of a woman who cried out to welcome him.

He went back a few steps and some of the men made a space for him between them.

He plunged into the middle of the circle.

An old man advanced a few steps towards the middle. He moved towards him.

The man whom the celebration was for planted a kiss on the head of the old man.

They lifted their hands up high.

The old man moved back a few steps and he followed him.

The men closed a gap, making him have to go back to the middle.

He shrugged his shoulders. The old man bent down stiffly.

He picked up some ashes and threw them over people's heads.

The ground shook with the fall of the men's feet.

A woman shouted, announcing that the time for the meeting had come.

The drummer bellowed, 'The night'.

All the men moved towards the two of them. They surrounded them.

They moved back a few steps. They moved a step to the right. Two steps.

They moved towards the two of them.

They both lifted their hands up high.
The men moved a step to the left. Two steps.
The old man's body grew heavy. He leant his right arm against the man whom the celebration was for.
He embraced him with his left arm.
The men clapped their hands.
The square was ablaze.
The two men swayed. They threw their heads up to the sky.
They moved towards a fire that had been made in the middle. The blaze embraced them.
The man whom the celebration was for had sweated all his body could.
They moved back a few steps.
Some of the men made a space between them for the two, who plunged into the middle of the circle.
The sound of the drum calmed and the fire lit up, stoking up the noise. The men's voices blazed. And the women's voices blazed.
Joy spread. The man whom the celebration was for sprang up from the ground.
All the women of the village embraced him.
The old man was not only his father, he was also a father to the whole village.
A woman cried out from far away: 'Where is he?' The women want him.
He clung to the old man and said: 'I will stay here all night. The square still yearns to feel the fall of our feet.'
The noise was stoked by the drum.
In his soft voice, the drummer bellowed, 'The night'.
The gleam of gold flashed from his mouth.
The men moved towards the fire and lit up their hands. They formed a circle. They sang.
A young man moved towards the middle. He spun to the right, he spun to the left.
He stamped hard onto the ground and it threw him up high.
He looked down on the crowds of men. He shouted, 'Yahey!'
The ground grabbed hold of him again.
The man whom the celebration was for moved towards the middle. He tried to drag the old man with him.
The old man was feeling warm among the crowds of men.
He stood alongside the young man.
He stamped hard onto the ground and lifted his hands up high.

He shrugged his shoulders. He spun to the right. He moved a step forward. He moved towards the fire. He spun to the left. He moved a few steps away from the fire, towards the crowds of men.

He threw himself up high and then the ground grabbed hold of him ...

He moved towards the drummer. He clapped powerfully.

The young man moved towards the fire. He stamped his feet on the floor and the men trembled and clapped.

Their voices mingled with the sound of the thundering ground.

The man whom the celebration was for clapped alone.

He moved towards the drummer and shouted at him: 'We want your night to be hot.'

The drummer smiled, showing his gold teeth.

The young man leapt above the fire.

The noise of the drum was loud.

The old man lifted his hands up high.

The men lifted their hands up high.

The man whom the celebration was for picked up some ash and scattered it over people's heads.

The men moved back a few paces.

The square went white.

The drummer bellowed, 'The night'.

The young man headed towards the old man. The sheikh moved forward a few paces.

He put a piece of incense on the fire.

A fragrant smell spread over the square.

The women cried out, ululating, and moved towards the crowds of men.

The men surrounded the women's voices as they sang with joy, rejoicing for a woman who sprung, blazing, from the light of the sun.

The young man stamped hard on the ground.

It threw him up high.

He shouted, 'I am hers ... And she is mine ...'

The old man signalled with his head and spun his body around the men.

He lifted his hands up jubilantly.

The man whom the celebration was for wrapped him up in his arms.

The old man headed towards the young man. He said: 'She is yours.'

The drummer bellowed out, 'The night'.

The man whom the celebration was for spun towards the men.

The old man said: 'She is yours.'

The ground was heavy with his thudding steps.

The two of them surrounded the old man, spun with him to the right and moved a few paces towards the fire.

They spun to the left and the crowds of men took him in, lifting their hands up high.

They were singing joyful songs to throngs from the black night.

The fire lit up and stoked up the noise, and a woman moved towards the crowds of men.

Some of them jumped with fright.

She took hold of the old man's hand and took him from the two who had shut him off.

The circle of men surrounded the four of them.

The woman emitted a mournful cry.

The drummer moved towards the middle.

The men moved away slightly.

The man whom the celebration was for shrugged his shoulders and spun to the right. To the left.

The ground opened up under his feet.

He lifted his hands up high.

The body of the old man grew heavy; he looked for the body of the man whom the celebration was for and found it nearly plunging to the ground.

The young man picked him up and carried him through the circle of men.

The woman was still shut off by the ring within which the men had enclosed her.

The drummer bellowed out, 'The night'.

The woman let down her black hair and soared up high.

The man whom the celebration was for lifted up his hands and spun. To the right. To the left.

He shrugged his shoulders.

In a husky voice, he bellowed out 'the night'.

He moved back.

Some of the men made a gap for him between them.

He took hold of the woman's hand

They went out through that opening.

They went far out of the village.

The noise of the drum died down

The drummer.

The men.

The village died down.

And the night made their voices blaze.

The question

He moved towards him with heavy paces. He wanted to talk to him. For a long time they remained a pace apart. Would he move forward or back?

Why would he not speak first?

The hall was swarming with people; he knew none of them. It seemed to him that he had known him for all eternity, which might in fact be true.

– Allow me to introduce myself.

The words were lost in an ocean of thoughts. This is not a good formula for introductions; there must be a perfect formula.

– My name's Hassan.

And what does that mean?

Nothing at all. A lot of people's are called Hassan.

Maybe he will reply by saying 'And what should it mean to me if your name is Hassan?

What would you reply?

Try to gauge his character in the moment when you first address him.

Immerse yourself in him and disappear.

Don't lose the thought. Hold firm and you will be fine, and your name, Hassan, which means good, will be not only an identity but an essence. Try to rouse him with your presence inside him, certain that he is the only person who you have known for nearly all eternity.

'Please make sure that you each have a number and wait your turn.'

– My number is forty-eight and my name is Hassan. What's your number?

– Fifty.

What if I had said to him 'Hey, Mr Fifty.' He would no doubt have slapped me because he was attached to his name and proud of it.

Better to maintain the short, long pace between them.



The alley is long and narrow. Some boys are playing some games, passing about a small ball.

One of them throws it at another's head. It hits him from behind. Just a little graze with blood dripping from it.

He fills the neighbourhood with his screams.

His mother comes out in an inside-out abaya, with her grey hair flying out from behind a scarf. She hits him hard.

She tells him off.