



الجائزة العالمية للرواية العربية
INTERNATIONAL PRIZE FOR ARABIC FICTION

The International Prize for Arabic Fiction

Excerpts from the Shortlist 2022



Tareq Imam
Cairo Maquette



Reem Al-Kamali
Rose's Diary



Bushra Khalfan
Dilshad



Mohsine Loukili – *The
Prisoner of the Portuguese*



Khalid Al-Nassrallah
The White Line of Night



Mohamed Alnaas
Bread on Uncle Milad's Table



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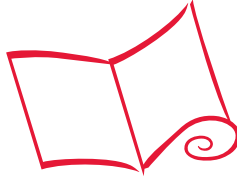
Excerpts from the 2022 Shortlist

مركز أبوظبي
لغة العربية
Abu Dhabi Arabic
Language Centre



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الجائزة العالمية للرواية العربية
INTERNATIONAL PRIZE FOR ARABIC FICTION

The Prize

The International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF), is the most prestigious and important literary prize in the Arab world. It aims to reward excellence in contemporary Arabic creative writing and to encourage the readership of high quality Arabic literature internationally through the translation and publication of winning and shortlisted novels in other major languages. IPAF was launched in April 2007 with the Booker Prize Foundation as its original mentor.

The Prize is currently sponsored by the Abu Dhabi Arabic Language Centre, under the umbrella of the Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi. Its overall management is the responsibility of its Board of Trustees, whose members include leading figures from both the Arab and international literary worlds. Day-to-day oversight and administration is undertaken by the Administrator, who is appointed by the Trustees.

Each year the Board of Trustees selects a new panel of five judges who are responsible for the selection of the longlist, shortlist and winner. The panel changes every year. In order to help ensure the independence and integrity of the selection process, the judges remain anonymous until the longlist is announced.

The shortlisted authors each receive \$10,000 US. The winning author goes on to receive a further \$50,000 US, with a commitment

that IPAF will meet the cost of translation of the winning novel into English to help underwrite its publication for an English speaking readership.

In addition to the annual prize, IPAF supports literary initiatives including its Nadwa (writers' workshop) for emerging writers from across the Arab world. Established in 2009, the nadwa was the first of its kind for Arab writers. Each Nadwa results in new fiction by some of the Arab world's most promising authors, some of whom have gone on to be shortlisted and even win the Prize. Nine Nadwas have taken place in Abu Dhabi (eight under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Hamdan bin Zayed Al-Nahyan and in 2017 supported by Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation). Others have been held in Jordan, Oman and Sharjah, in partnership with, respectively, the Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation, the Muscat Cultural Club and the Department of Culture – Sharjah Government.

For more information:
www.arabicfiction.org

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Language Centre



The Abu Dhabi Arabic Language Centre

The Abu Dhabi Arabic Language Centre, established under a directive from HH the UAE President, as part of the Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi, works to support Arabic language development and modernisation through comprehensive strategies and frameworks, enrich the scientific, educational, cultural and creative contributions of the Arabic language, promote Arabic language proficiency and cultural understanding, and support Arab talents in the fields of writing, translation, publishing, scientific research, arts, content creation, and organizing book fairs.

The Centre works to realise its foundational vision through dedicated programmes, human expertise, and meaningful partnerships with the world's most prestigious technical, cultural and academic institutions.

Foreword

Issues of identity and freedom

The six novels chosen by the judges as the short list for the 2022 International Prize for Arabic Fiction are distinctive for their variety of forms and narrative styles, though they all take on issues of identity and freedom.

Some of those novels evoke history and memory, exploring the quotidian and giving expression to the torments and dreams of human beings in various Arab environments. They depict individuals who are marginalised, repressed or forgotten in the historical texts as they endeavour to shape their own destinies, in the hope that this will save them from the brunt of foreign domination, social and political control, or hunger, poverty and disease, as in the novels *Dilshad*, *Rose's Diary* and *The Prisoner of the Portuguese*.

Other novels address the demand for different aspects of freedom: freedom to imagine building a reality in which illusion and fact overlap because of an absence of meaning, as in *Cairo Maquette*, freedom of expression and creativity in the face of visible and invisible authorities that suppress thought, as in *The White Line of Night*, and the freedom to choose an individual identity in a conservative society dominated by symbolic and physical violence, as in *Bread on Uncle Milad's Table*.

The authors of the six novels, each in their own way, have tried to construct an imaginary world by various styles of fictional narrative.

In some of them we find the logical structure of events demolished and the chronological structure manipulated, and in others we find tight plots and well-coordinated narrative. But all the novels converge in the interactive nature that characterises them, with a multiplicity of language, voices and ideologies, to confirm once again that relativism is the basis of narrative imagination.

Cairo Maquette by Tareq Imam

Cairo Maquette embarks on the adventure of reconfiguring reality according to the logic of imagination and art. In the space between what is real, what is hypothetical, what is true, imaginary, present, past and future, the novelist finds a way to capture the moments of transition and construct a new Cairo on the ruins of the Cairo that we know. By playing a game of erasure and reconstruction, he builds exotic parallel worlds based on the struggle between the logic of power and the logic of art. Through the twists of this aesthetic adventure and its artistic requirements, with an obvious inclination towards experimentation, he poses philosophical questions about art, power, reality and imagination.

Dilshad, A Tale of Hunger and Satiety, by Bushra Khalfan

In *Dilshad*, Bushra Khalfan portrays the city of Muscat in the early 1900s through three districts, relying on multiple narrators whose stories converge and diverge in a symmetry that represents the basis of the plot of the story. In this city, which is ethnically, religiously and linguistically diverse, poverty, disease and ignorance are rife and the shadow of death looms at every moment. In it the characters move – lost, marginalised, uncertain, seeking a way to survive. *Dilshad* is a painful novel in that it deals with marginalised groups and restores them to the history of a city that will see great changes.

Rose's Diary by Reem Al-Kamali

In 1960s Dubai, Rose writes her diary in protest against a society that has prevented her from continuing her university education. In the

novel, writing is an act of liberation from the prison of being a marginalised woman. The narrative imagination in *Rose's Diary* is a cry of protest and a critical stance towards a reality that frustrates individual ambition. But reconstructing Rose's individual memory of the 1960s, as she records what she sees around her, is at the same time a reconstruction of the collective memory of Dubai society, with its traditions, customs and architecture, and a revelation of the contradictions brought about by modernisation before the establishment of a modern state. So *Rose's Diary* records the memory of a city and engages with its transformations through a feminist vision that restores recent history.

***The White Line of Night* by Khalid Al-Nassrallah**

In his novel *The White Line of Night*, Khalid Al-Nassrallah constructs a world of nightmares and conflicts, starting with the question of book censorship. The main protagonist has been an avid reader since childhood. Later he finds work in the world of books, specifically in the government's Department of Published Works. A conflict then arises between, on the one hand, the repressive authority that uses this avid reader to ban and censor freedom of thought and creativity and, on the other hand, the intellectual seeking to expand the margins of freedom despite the restrictions imposed by the institution for which he works. It is a novel that explores the dark corners of the secret world of censorship, as a metaphor for the repressive mechanisms of those in power.

***Bread on Uncle Milad's Table* by Mohammed Alnaas**

Bread on Uncle Milad's Table questions the concept of masculinity in a conservative society that is dominated by preconceptions about the distribution of tasks between men and women. Eccentric Murad, who has an unusual relationship with his wife Zainab, finds himself at odds with social conventions and tries to redefine his gender identity. He then experiences the ruptures and contradictions of this identity in the course of his individual, capricious and enervating search for a bal-

ance between the prevalent conventions and his desire to follow his own inclinations.

The Prisoner of the Portuguese by Mohsine Loukili

The Prisoner of the Portuguese takes us back to 16th-century Morocco, when there was conflict between the Saadis and the Marinids and Portuguese military encroachments along the coast. Through the character Naji Awwad, a man from Fez who is held captive in one of the Portuguese fortresses and escapes execution, the novelist relates the adventure of a man seeking deliverance, with all the anticipation, anxiety, longing and hatred that comes with it. In the historical framework that the novelist has chosen, the novel is woven with strikingly human depth around the subjects of love, sacrifice, hope, pain and revenge.

Shukri Mabkhout
Chair of Judges, 2022

Cairo Maquette

by Tareq Imam



Tareq Imam is an Egyptian novelist and journalist, born in 1977. He is deputy chief editor of the Radio and Television magazine in Cairo. He began writing at a young age, publishing his first collection of short stories, *New Birds Unspoiled by the Air*, at the age of eighteen. He has published eleven books of novels and short stories, including *The Calm of Killers* (2007), *The Second Life of Constantine Cavafis* (2012), *My Father's Shrine* (2013), *The City of Endless Walls* (2018) and *The Taste of Sleep* (2019). In 2010, he took part in the writers' workshop (Nadwa) for talented young writers organized by IPAF. Some of his books have been translated and he has won numerous Egyptian, Arab and international prizes, such as the Egyptian State Incentive Award, the Sawiris Award (twice), the Egyptian Ministry of Culture Award (twice), the Kuwaiti Suad Al-Sabah Prize, and the Spanish Museum of Words (Museo de la Palabra) Prize.

Origa

Cairo, 2045

Origa remembers how, in his childhood, he killed his father: he pretended his hand was a gun, stuck his index finger to his father's forehead and shouted "Boom". His father closed his eyes and Origa was about to laugh. He thought his father was acting dead. When he opened his eyes again, Origa was going to do it again, but that never happened because his father was well and truly dead.

There was a deep, gaping hole in the man's forehead, and blood was immediately gushing out of it – real blood, dark, thick and sticky. When his father's head slumped down onto his chest, Origa's first instinct was to move his finger away, as if that would be enough to bring his father back from the dead.

Like a selfish child worried that death has deprived him of his toy, like a murderer hiding his weapon, he immediately closed his fist. As a child, he hadn't thought this through, but at the first sign of danger everyone tries to survive, especially murderers.

Slightly distracted from his dead father, the child looked at his finger, which still had smoke streaming out from under the fingernail. As far as he could, with the mentality of a five-year-old, he wondered how it could turn into the barrel of a gun. After that he often looked at his finger and pointed it at people like a gun whenever he thought about killing someone, or killing himself. He never forgot that it was more than just a threat – he only had to make the decision to pull the trigger.

Now, twenty-five years later, Origa is looking at the same finger, which for no obvious reason had refused to grow any bigger since that long-ago evening back in 2020. It's still the same size as it was at the moment of the killing. His criminal finger, which remains innocent in his hand, remains the finger of a child.

He thought back to that incident because of the foreign woman sitting opposite him – the artistic director at Shoghl Cairo Gallery/ The City

Art Space, to which Origa has applied for a grant. The Missus, as they call her. The Missus and nothing else, as if the title serves its purpose without any name attached. In its truncated form, the title was enough to identify her.

She noticed his tiny finger when he walked in and, when they shook hands across the vast desk, he could feel her fingers groping around in his hand to find it. That happened whenever he shook hands with someone for the first time, especially when they realised that the finger hadn't been amputated, and wasn't shrivelled up either. It was just a body part that had decided not to grow up, leaving the rest of his body to expand without it into the world. One day his body would age, then disappear, while his finger lived on in its childhood. Maybe, through its ability to kill, it would achieve complete immortality, unthreatened by the grave.

Her hand lingered as she withdrew it, as if by lingering she was giving his finger time to make a confession. It was he who pulled his hand back, although he realised it might seem impolite. In turn he glanced at the finger, which had survived again, as if by looking at it, he had checked that it hadn't made any confession.

There he was, sitting opposite her, having withdrawn his hand, looking for the first time at her blue eyes, so clear they made anyone sitting in front of her feel that this was the colour of her gaze.

Between them lay the surface of a desk so big he felt they were living in different worlds. It was circular, matching the larger circle that was the room, and in the centre a smaller circle had been cut out. The Missus sat in the smaller circle, hemmed in on all sides by the rim, in a space so tight she could hardly move her chair. She was trapped in the hole, with no obvious way out. Origa had no idea how she moved in or out.

On the office wall there was a disparate collection of miniature 3D models. To Origa they looked like her talismans to ward off evil spirits. Among them Origa noticed a model of the Cairo Tower, which sent a shiver down his spine as soon as he saw it, evoking childhood memories he had tried to set aside as soon as he entered the room. Everything in the room seemed to insist that he would not succeed. Inside his little

bag, which he wore in a cross-body position, he kept a version of this model, on the same scale.

The curved wall behind the Missus's back was pale, as if it drew its colour from her face. In the middle of the wall, right above her head, hung an old black-and-white picture of a girl's face, in a circular frame. Origa had no doubt that the girl was this same woman many years ago, though it was hard to guess how many.

The older people grow the more they look the same as they did when they were children. It's easy to recognise their old features in photographs. It seems that children are born only to grow old, and only then do they know what they really look like. Origa believed that, and in the moments of silence while he looked at the Missus he felt that this woman was now old enough to become a child again.

He looked alternately at Missus's face and the picture of her on the wall, and in his own way of inverting things, he imagined: "What if the face in the picture were alive, and the face in the room right now were dead? If one of these faces is this woman's real face, and the other is a fake, which one would you choose?"

He remained silent as he rapidly ran through the questions that whispered in his ear in order to reach final answers before the Missus spoke and broke the silence. Origa had learned that, whenever two people meet for the first time, they are friends until one of them starts talking. As he sat in the round chair assigned to him on the outer curve of the desk, set at an angle such that they were never face to face, the Missus gave him enough silence. She seemed to be good at handling those awkward moments when people form their first impressions of the people they meet, which are often their final impressions too.

"The Cairo Maquette is an ambitious art project. The aim is to make a miniaturised model of the city, on a scale of 1:35. When it's completed, a full copy of Cairo at a particular moment in history will emerge."

This was the first remark the woman had made, and Origa realised that until this moment she hadn't said a single word since he came into the room, not even a word of welcome. From now on he would listen to her, since an interview was meant to begin, and he was meant to

Cairo Maquette

by Tareq Imam

The “Cairo Work Gallery”, an independent gallery dedicated to marginalized arts, announces it is offering a grant to build a small model (maquette) of Cairo as it was a quarter of a century before, in the year 2020, when it was still Egypt’s capital. From that point, the novel explores Cairo at four points in its history: 2045, 2020, 2011 and an unknown time in the distant future, focusing each time on a protagonist who is an independent artist. Origa is a passionate designer of maquettes of the city, who suffered since a child the stigma of being blamed for his father’s death; Noud, a documentary filmmaker, is under police surveillance since coming out of prison two years before, after a sentence for offending public morals in her last film; Baliardo, a graffiti artist at the time of the 2011 revolution, is always on the run from the police for defacing walls; and Manga is a cartoonist who possesses two kinds of memories of the city. While the different time periods intersect, the location remains the same – the gallery. *Cairo Maquette* explores the relationship of the city with the individual, in particular with the marginalized artist searching for his identity, rejected by everyone – state and society alike.



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present himself in the best possible light, to persuade this woman, this “Missus”, that no one could replicate the heart of Cairo better than his two hands, which hadn’t presented themselves as well as they might, because one of them, the right one to be precise, had an index finger that hadn’t grown since childhood.

“The gallery is launching the Cairo Maquette as a retrospective. It’s essentially about reviving memories of the city. It’s one of the gallery’s sustainable projects. The new version will be entitled Cairo Maquette 2020, and the aim is to document the way the former Egyptian capital looked a quarter of a century ago.”

A quarter of a century. The expression sounded scary. The only memory that the Missus’s words evoked in him was his individual memory.

“Maybe you were still a child at the time.”

“I was five years old.”

She looked spontaneously at his finger, but she soon looked away and said nothing for a long time, as if giving him enough time to mull over what she had said. But Origa didn’t think about her words: her voice had his full attention. The rhythm of the formal Arabic she spoke, her Levantine accent and her sharp, high-pitched tone, reminded him of the Arabic dubbing on the foreign films he watched as a child, again taking him back to images from his past. He noticed that there were particular words which this Missus pronounced in such an emphatic way that, if they were put on paper, they might have been written in bold type.

Finally, she took her hands off the table to reveal two cards turned face down, like playing cards she was hiding. To Origa they looked like two identical playing cards, especially when the Missus pushed them towards him, with a swish along the wooden surface, which made him feel he was in some gambling dive.

Without asking, Origa turned the cards face-up, as if he had understood the rule of the game immediately. They were photographs – one of the real gallery and the other of a small-scale model of the gallery. The pictures had been taken in such a way that the two galleries looked exactly the same size. At first sight, Origa knew they were his.

Under the terms of the grant, those chosen to take part would be assigned to make a model of a particular part of the city. On the application form, there was space for the candidates to suggest the area they thought they were “worthy of representing through their work as model-makers”, according to the text.

Without hesitation he wrote Downtown, meaning central Cairo, including the gallery he was now sitting in. Origa had never lived outside the downtown area. It was written as his place of birth on his birth certificate, a privilege enjoyed by a very small number of people, especially if they were poor. It was his home, so much so that going out to any other part of Cairo felt like an arduous journey to unknown territory where they spoke a different language.

The application form called for candidates to make a model of one of the buildings in the area that the candidate wanted to work on and send in a photograph, to show how skilfully they could replicate it. Like a gambler going for broke, Origa decided that his sample would be Shoghl Cairo Gallery itself.

He had sent the pictures by email, and clearly the gallery management had had them printed on thick card.

He was looking at the pictures, which lay at an angle like the splayed legs of a seated man, when the Missus spoke out again, this time with a question: “Which of them is the original gallery and which is the model?”

Pleased without showing it, he guessed she was asking because she really could not tell them apart, not asking a procedural question to assert her authority. After long thought, his pride gave way to fear, and he gave an honest reply: “I don’t know.”

His uncertainty puzzled him: it wasn’t a deliberate form of boastfulness or a ploy of any kind.

The Missus kept looking at him, examining him as one might examine a piece of furniture that is supposed to be old. Instead of looking surprised or asking a sceptical question that cast doubt on whether he really had made the model, she simply seemed to take him at his word.

She gestured to him to hand the pictures back and he slid them across

the table top in the same manner. Again, she waited in silence until she was sure he wasn't going to say anything else. The Missus turned her rotating chair slightly to face the wall behind her. Without any preliminaries, the wall lit up and turned into a screen, and a strange stick appeared in her hand. Origa felt that it had come into being out of nothing. It was a thin stick with a long and even thinner pointed bit at the end. When he looked at it closely, Origa discovered that it was also shaped like the Cairo Tower, but stretched out in such a way that the shaft was longer and thinner.

There was one giant yellow folder at the top right of the screen on the wall. She tapped it with the tip of her pointer and the photographs appeared again, side by side and enlarged this time to divide the screen but even at this scale it seemed impossible to find any difference between them. After moments of looking, or maybe of fruitless comparison, the Missus turned the side of her face towards him, as if finally revealing a sign of admiration that appeared like a dwarfish sun in the sky of her icy face:

“They both look original.”

Spontaneously and without thinking, Origa commented truthfully: “They both look fake.”

With the tip of the pointer, she started to move one of the photographs towards the other until it was on top of the other one. They were indeed like two identical playing cards, and as soon they were perfectly aligned, the two disappeared together like used cards in a virtual card game. She turned again to face Origa, abandoning the screen, where her childhood photograph reappeared like a mysterious icon hovering alone on the artificially blue desktop.

“Can an imaginary place wipe out a real place to this extent?” asked the Missus. She seemed to be asking herself the question, although she waited for him to answer.

“An imaginary bullet can also wipe out a real person,” said Origa, drawing his finger and pointing it at the woman's head.

Translated by Jonathan Wright

Rose's Diary

by Reem Al-Kamali



Reem Al-Kamali is a novelist, writer and researcher from the UAE, born in 1972. She is an editor of the cultural section of the Emirati *Al-Bayan* newspaper. Her published works include the novels *The Sultanate of Hormuz* (2013), which was awarded the Owais Prize for Creativity in 2015, *The Statue of Dalma* (2018) winner of the Sharjah Award for Arab Creativity, and *Rose's Diary* (2021). In 2015, she took part in the writers' workshop (Nadwa) for talented young writers organized by IPAF, where she worked on *The Statue of Dalma*. Reem Al-Kamali studied history at university and is fascinated by archaeology, art, myths and culture in general.

Tales of the sea are many, and I can recount them in my diary. The sea is a piece of narrated heritage, a special history that differs from the history of animal herding and the legacy of agriculture. The sea is strong and its salty water is water that wrestles with the wind and launches raids against the shore. It puts out fires and drowns soil. It is water that devours man, and so he is forced to attack it. But who is attacking whom, I wonder? When I studied history in school, it was drilled into our heads that ever since people in the Arabian Peninsula abandoned herding and farming in favour of jihad and raiding, in their greed for the spoils of war, they drove their arid lands to further desertification. Only our sea, as we first understood it, retained its allure, with unrestricted mastery of its skills, of pearl-diving, fishing, traveling, and navigating by the stars and winds, such that the sea lived on and preserved its heritage, both before and after the coming of Islam.

I close my eyes and gaze upon nothingness by a faint and delicate light that covers the indistinct shape of my slender body, facing the night with its dream-giving melody. But that dream is the greatest lie. There it is, assailing my eyelids with a feeble glow. I dozed off and the colours were freed from my eyes, after falling into a deep sleep that allowed me to see and respond to myself. I am the bride of writing.

I woke up thinking about what my uncle and his friends had said the night before, in their discussion about the imperialist British East India Company, a company with military power, that had an army with soldiers, mobilized troops and a fleet of ships, a company that concealed the most wicked truths about itself, with outposts from India to China, from the cities of Asia to the Arabian Gulf. It had once monopolized our trade, in the form of expropriation, not competition. The English and Dutch had begun fighting with each other over our trade and our

harbours, after they had given the Portuguese the boot. Kept safe by their local agents, they brought in goods from seaport to seaport.

It was a malevolent company that put our traders out of business, so that the English could grow rich from outpost to outpost, with trading privileges for them alone; dominance in exchange for submission. The result was the bankruptcy of our traders, as one by one the descendants of the great merchant families of the kingdom of the Gulf, the kingdom of Ormus, were condemned from the decks of foreign ships, and for the first time in the history of the world, the new term, “London merchants”, emerged, to designate their claim to a monopoly over everything.

The English merchant was born during the era of ruthless competition, following a history of pestilence and bloodshed, of the cold touch of plague and the flames of religious war. The English left all that behind thanks to the Crown’s arms. There was no hiding behind it once they had cast off their timidity, the Crown having granted permission to companies and commissioned agents to put to sea. For there were profits to be made, a license to trade under Company protection, and the establishment of new cities and ports for their ill-gotten gains, from pure silk, warm cotton, hunger-sating rice, and spices, to imported pepper and opium products. The Gulf Arab was exiled from the paradise of his sea, having beheld the hardships within the confines of middlemen and wage-work. There was an ugly cacophony of new cities on our shores: they were born unnaturally, and they emerged lacking the usual senses.

I close my eyes, and I feel a desire to write differently in my secret diary. I ask myself: how long will I go on in my traditional style, recounting things the way our grandmothers did? When will I go beyond expressive performance and rhetorical gibberish? I have to take a critic’s view of my writing and be ruthless with myself. There is a voice whispering in my ear: *Your texts are not evolving.*

Whoever it is that is whispering to me, tell me: *What am I to do?* Should I imagine myself as an English woman in charge of running

the East India Company? I am well aware that throughout the world today women run nothing more than their household or a small plot of land. In my imagination, my determination leads to certain profit, since colonialism means trade; trade means plunder; plunder means appropriation after seizure; seizure means acquisition; and acquisition means laying a hand on something and confiscating it, and then dominating it. And nothing but a pen can express all that.

My most beautiful fantasy is that I, a girl, manage a company the size of the East India Company. It's impossible, but in my imagination, I can make up whatever I want. So I would be exceptionally good at commanding my ship as a captain in the Gulf and I would triumph, which would boost my profits. I would demand to establish new trading stations for the company I would name the Respected Arabian Gulf Company. My coffers would be filled with the fees paid to us. Why should men be the only ones to master the skills of captaining ships and of navigating by the stars throughout our maritime history?

Today I will make it known that I am a Gulf captain.

From the Arabian Gulf to the Strait of Hormuz, justice has sunk beneath the waves and uncertainty has floated to the surface. For the sake of choice profits, new currencies, treaties, the fur trade, and the taste of tobacco, I will now transform myself from a female Gulf captain to a female commander of an English ship. After all that we have accomplished, I won't allow the ruling families of the Gulf, with their naval fleet and their remaining power from their bygone dominion of gulfs and inlets, to come and reclaim their water and overwhelm our English ships, ships that belong to us white men. I won't allow them to kill our troops – our sailors and officers – and seize the ports and warehoused goods. For I run this company with cold self-control. I remember its painful history, from its founding at the hands of a merchant-pirate minister and the greatest pirate of all, London's sovereign ruler. I won't acknowledge the national origin of the warm pearl oysters of the inlets. I will accuse them of piracy and note them as such in our records, to which we and the entire world will lend credence.

I woke up and, reaching under my pillow, I pulled out my notebook, which now began to be crowded with writing. It was so hard for me not to have all my words pour out. I was agitated, and would have poured it all out onto the page in spite of myself, if I hadn't produced a voice of my own that let me hear myself within. I love to write on an empty page. It's like a broad path that I have been eagerly walking along, ever since last night, after spending the evening hiding ridiculously under the bed and listening in on my uncle and his friends – the sources for my account, which has a new title:

Mrs Taylor, A Prisoner of the Gulf

In the shadow of an epic sea-battle in the stormy Indian Ocean, a beautiful woman emerged from the *Minerva*. She stood on the ship's deck. The hearts of the winds trembled at her elegant appearance and her nursing child, crying in her arms. The autumn colour turned paler as it fluttered over her modest cap. This charming young woman was none other than Mrs Taylor, the wife of an English lieutenant, Robert Taylor. He was known to the British East India Company and to its outposts – from the Gulf to India and the East Indies – as a young officer in the diplomatic service who had a bright future in espionage ahead of him.

The autumn of 1806 was different. No sooner had the *Minerva* fallen into the hands of Gulf Arab sailors, who were attached to their independence, than the waters of the Gulf became an open waterway where foreigners came and went, a playing field for naval warfare from every direction, to the point that the Gulf lost its stability, what with all the high-seas pursuits and chaotic free-for-all. The Gulf sailors were opposed to an English-Ottoman war in their bays, or a Dutch-English war, or an Iranian-Danish war, but there was no reaction until they began making their feelings known, by overpowering ships that belonged to these hostile powers, from their Gulf to the open ocean. Capture was the fate of the *Minerva*, as the Gulf sailors fought with most of those who were on board. But they fell instantly silent when

they saw her, with her child, appear unexpectedly before them. At which point, being honest men, they decided to take her back to their ship, to hand her over, along with her nursing baby, to the women as a prisoner of war. They took, as well, the first mate and one of the sailors, as leverage, as bargaining chips to use in negotiations, and as a prize to put the two sides on equal footing. Perhaps, it will result in driving the English, followed by the other foreigners, out of their Gulf. There is a hope that that would happen, in the wake of the departure of the Portuguese and their companies, who were like marauders and rich thieves, and whom the English kicked out, only to take their place. Now it would be their turn. But the question remains: What do you suppose is this young lady's story?

The capture of the *Minerva* stirred up anguish in the hearts of the Scots, the masters of the colonies, by order of the British crown, from the Indian Ocean to the Gulf. For the Scotsman's natural disposition is one of miserly circumspection that approaches indifference, as he hides his fascination in the slowness of his speech, makes his presence known through his cold demeanour, relies heavily on his having little in the way of delicate feelings, and conceals any gentleness from his personality. Despite the deep roots of his determination and his abilities in life, to strangers he seems to have a superficial personality. Those qualities have been apparent to the English for a long time, and they became concerned with the question of how they could make use of their dear old Scottish brother, who was incapable of being an amusing conversationalist. What could they do but bestow on him the honour of setting him down in their imperial territories, between those who chose to resist and those who cooperated? The Scot was best suited to manage the affairs of their empire, on which the sun never sets. Without a doubt, anyone who negotiates with the profit-making, frugal Scottish character, eager for goods and productivity – to make money and not to lose it – is doomed to failure. The Scot satisfies his stern economic frugality by securing great wealth. Rigorous and relentless in his perseverance, never flagging, he defends himself by restoring the wealth of nations and then devouring them. He succeeds at his task and re-

ceives the most medals in his country's history.

When Mrs Taylor, of Armenian origins, was made prisoner, the representative in the Gulf paid no mind to her, and the director of the East India Company took no interest in her, nor did anyone else, from their agents to the residents at their various commercial offices, other than the regret they felt over the sailing ship *Minerva*, armed with all those cannons that had been burned, sunk, and plundered, and their sorrow at having only just recently paid a great deal of money to have it serviced.

Mrs Taylor was quietly transported from the waters of the Indian Ocean to the Gulf, to Ras al-Khaimah, so that its women could look after her and her child, while her officer husband went mad demanding that she be returned, no matter the ransom, while he sent letters to all the official entities. These entities were fed up with the conduct of the Gulf sailors, and with their growing defensive power. At that point, they had decided to label the Gulf sailors "pirates", so that foreigners would believe it to be true and their enemies could make use of the term.

The British fleet shed tears in the waters of the Gulf, as far as India, fearing they would be attacked. Lieutenant Taylor received no cooperation from his government since the amount of the ransom was quite substantial and while his wife wasn't of English origin. The question of family roots entered cruelly into a dispute over race and origin, and although her husband was English, the strength of discrimination loomed large and towered over other factors in the face of the senseless loss of ships.

The sea is the sea, wherever it is, as the ships proceed along troubled courses, however armed they are with cannons and science. And because the story is looking for a glimmer of mockery, we are going to Ras al-Khaimah where the women are sitting down together. Mrs Taylor is participating, along with the ladies of that place, who have treated her and her nursing child as a guest and permitted her to talk to the group:

"We never expected that the great sailing ship *Minerva* would fall into anyone's hands, especially since it was named after Minerva, the

Roman goddess of wisdom, whose symbol is an owl of good fortune.”

The ladies received this with loud bursts of laughter, since they also had a sailing ship called the *Owl*, named after the hooting nocturnal bird, and it was a steadfast vessel. “Your great ship should have been named the *Mule*. Then it might have had better luck because no one bothers to attack a tame mule.”

Laughter prevails over their time together.

The ransom from his government to free his wife, expected by the lieutenant, didn't come. After the Arabs' force in the Gulf had grown to over sixty large ships and great numbers of small boats, to come to the aid of their people, along with thousands upon thousands of men who traced their origins exclusively to cities along the Gulf, Lieutenant Taylor thought for a while, asking himself: “Who is his wife that they would take her?”

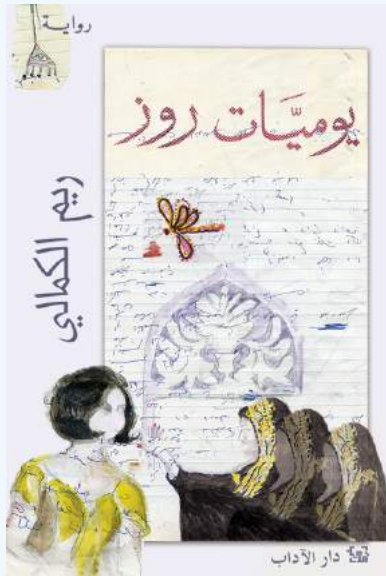
He was determined, and didn't despair of getting his wife and infant child back. Over several long months, numerous messages plied back and forth between him, the British authorities, the government of India, the resident, and the implicated government offices, with no end in sight, while the lovely woman passed her time in the living quarters at Ras al-Khaimah and became an object of interest as she was nourished on fresh milk to fill her breasts, for the purpose of keeping her beautiful child fed. Her clothes had changed, and instead of tight-fitting dresses with corsets, she wore a traditional Gulf *makhwar* dress in magnificent colours, sometimes of rustling parachute cloth and sometimes made from *Bu Tuffaha* cloth, which suited her pinkish skin. And when the burning hot wind came from the direction of the interior of the Arabian Peninsula, making skin crack with its harshness, and when the scorpion winds vied with each other in sand and dust, and her child took his first steps, they dressed her in light and inexpensive cloth, such as *kalfas* and *Bu Barih*, because of the heat. And still the ransom didn't come.

The number of prisoners increased, and Lieutenant Taylor's torment grew because he couldn't give up on her. But when the harvest season arrived he was able to buy her back for one thousand Maria Theresa

Rose's Diary

by Reem al-Kamali

The events of *Rose's Diary* take place in the historic neighbourhood of Shindagha, Dubai, in the 1960s, before the foundation of the UAE. After the death of her mother, Rose's uncle refuses to allow Rose to travel to Damascus to study Arabic literature with her secondary school classmates. Rose – a voracious reader who loves writing – pours out her anger in secret diaries containing stories and questions about life, drawing upon local history, society and ancient traditions. When each notebook is full, she throws it into a nearby river, so that no-one can read what she has written.



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dollars, which was the amount of the ransom for her and her child. It was deemed a large amount, which Great Britain later insisted on recovering from him.

The English continued to record losses due to the Gulf Arabs seizing their ships, whose construction was of high quality – with elegance and precision – from the *Sylph* with its destructive cannons, to the *Corinthian*, the *Shannon*, the *Trimmer*, the *Flay*, the *Hector*, the *Albert*, the *Nautilus*, the well-armed *Fury*, the *Mary*, which was carrying troops, and even the magnificent cruisers, the *Mornington* and the *Tyrant*. All these ships sank in the waters of the Gulf and the Indian Ocean. And so England concluded its first treaty of friendship and alliance with the Shah of Persia, of the ruling Qajar dynasty, following the misadventure with the *Minerva*, Mrs Taylor and her husband, the lieutenant.

England also granted more powers to the British East India Company, with exclusive commercial rights. And the more displeased they became with the Arabs making attacks on them, the more England eased the way for Persia to gradually overpower their islands and villages, to reduce their power, from Qeshm and Hengam islands to Kish, Nakhiloo, Charak, Bandar Kong, Basaidu, and Lengeh. The takeover of territories continued in revenge for every attack by the Gulf sailors on the foreigners' ships in their bays, such that places disappeared from sight.

And starting from that year in the 19th century, with its trembling autumn on the deck of the *Minerva*, the English began a new manufacturing technique for their ships, fortifying them and building them of iron, with screw propellers and steam engines. It would take them years to get to smart engines, while the ships of the Arabian Gulf remained the same as they had always been.

Translated by Chip Rossetti

Dilshad

by Bushra Khalfan



Bushra Khalfan is an Omani short story writer and novelist, born in 1969. She has been writing short stories, novels and articles for a quarter of a century. From 2002 to 2011, she wrote a weekly article for the Omani *Al-Watan* and *Al-Ru'ya* newspapers, and she currently writes for the *Oman* paper. Her collection of open texts, *Dust* (2008), was awarded the Omani Writers' Association Prize. From 2010 to 2012, she was head of the Literature and Creativity Committee at the Muscat Cultural Club. In 2014, she founded the Omani narrative laboratory and has run it since then. She has organized a number of creative writing workshops in Oman and the Gulf region, including "The Short Story: More is Less" (Kuwait, 2016), "The Short Story: From Idea to Text" (Sultan Qaboos University, 2017) and "How to Create a Three-Dimensional Character in a Fictional Work" (Kuwait, 2018).

Dilshad

My mother swore I'd come out of her womb laughing, and that she had named me Farhan—"Happy"—to cancel out the bad luck that had come from being born to a cursed father, who'd been killed by thirst as he contemplated his navel under an ill-fated acacia tree in Sayh al-Malih.

I was born in a tent on the east bank of the rim of the great valley, and I grew up in the shade of another tent on its west bank.

I would race with Issa, Hussein and Noria on horses made from palm branches, shouting boisterously in a language that was a mixture of words from my childhood, adults' curses, and our mothers' insults.

With them I would get into fights, and my forehead would get bruised by the pebbles that the kids from adjoining neighborhoods threw at us. And along with the bruises, I'd have dirt pressed into my open wounds by Ma Halima to stop the bleeding.

With them I'd climb over the fence of the Banyan¹ merchants' stable, and when they weren't looking, I'd steal rotten dates from the cattlefeed and devour them without anybody noticing.

Ma Halima would punish me and beat me, just like she did them, and like them, I wanted to sleep close to her. But right before sunset, I would leave them to go back to my own neighborhood, where everybody called me wad al-Sayh, Sayh's boy, and I answered to that. I didn't know who this Sayh was whose name I'd inherited, but I accepted it, just the way I accepted my father's absence.

According to my mother, my father had died a few months before I was born, and when it happened, his provision of water to all the people of Muscat stopped. She said the well water had turned brackish when some shepherds found his remains, face down, under an acacia tree in Sayh al-Malih, and that they had only recognized him from a hemp rope he used to tie around his waist.

But who was going to believe my mother? When I grew up, I went to the well myself, and its water was sweet. Besides, nobody even remembered my having a father.

I didn't understand what wad al-Sayh meant until I was older and picked up on the tone in which it was uttered. Because of it I got into a fight with Saeed bin Nasser. After that, some other boys ganged up on me and started punching and kicking me. Then they threw me down in front of the tent with a bloody nose and mouth. My mother was watching, but she didn't intervene or do anything to protect me from them. She didn't even take a handful of dirt and press it into my wounds after they'd finished with me.

That is why, after my mother died—an event I'd been anxiously awaiting—I thought I would go live with Ma Halima, marry Noria and become a Baluchi like them. I thought that all the words Noria taught me were beautiful, and all the swear words I learned from Issa and Hussein when they were angry were really useful too.

But my mother didn't die when I was little, so I grew up in our tent, which was just barely big enough to hold the two of us and a small wooden chest. Meanwhile, I grew into my name, which got weightier and weightier with the passing of the days, while al-Sayh—that person I couldn't place and whose name I couldn't figure out—became all the more burdensome and deadly.

I might have been six years old when I found my mother dead, and I had to cry over her, since I didn't have anybody else to do it for me. After they buried her and scattered back to their tents, I stayed in our tent by myself. It was just me and my mother's chest, which had nothing in it but a yellow wagaya² and a small jar that held the remains of some mahaleb that she used to rub on her forehead before going out for water. I stuck my index finger into the jar, into the thick ointment, and then brought it up to my nose. It was my mother's scent, all right. It was the smell of the hair I'd lain up against as I slept behind her. It was the scent she gave off when she was churning milk, when she came back from the well with her wagaya soaking wet, when she lit the fire, and when she screamed and cursed the world, the people in the neighborhood, and me. I felt the full weight of her curses descend on my heart, only to have them ascend abruptly in a wave of laughter that shook me from head to toe.

I don't know how long I lay trembling on the ground from laughing so hard, and I don't know if my laughter reached anyone's ears, but I took hold of myself and stood up. I shook off my laughter and my mother's curses and insults onto the ground, where they were covered with dust, and then vanished.

I went to Hillat al-Sheikh, where Ma Halima lived. I told her my mother had died, and that I wanted to marry Noria and live in their tent. But Ma Halima told me I couldn't marry Noria because we were brother and sister, and that I wouldn't be able to live in their tent since it was too small. She said I'd have to go back to my own neighborhood, since I was an Arab boy.

Ma Halima

I don't know what kind of a woman Fadila bint Butti was, but I'll never forgive her for what she did to that child. He had just learned to walk, and followed her through the wadi, tottering naked over the rocks with nothing to cover him, not even a worn-out rag.

Every day around mid-morning she would cross the path in front of my tent, her face daubed with sandalwood and mahaleb. Swathed in her yellow wagaya, she would walk with a rhythmic swing, her water jug on her hip. She would tilt it, and sway along with it, as if she were Jal Bibi,³ daughter of Shah Nawaz, or as if she were the only person who had ever walked the Earth.

Watching the two of them as I sat in front of the tent washing dishes or crushing salt, I would see that little boy, crying and stumbling along, trying to catch up with her and stretching out his little arms to no avail. When he got too tired, he'd sit down on a small boulder near our tent and start to cry, his throaty rasps getting louder and louder until she came back. But she paid him no attention, not checking on him even with a backward glance. Instead, she would just continue on her way without so much as a turn of her head, as if he weren't her son, or as if she would have preferred for him to turn into a rock like the one he perched on as he wept.

The last thing I needed was to carry somebody else's burden. I had plenty of burdens of my own, and some to spare. But he fell. He fell off that rock right in front of me. So I rushed over to him, thinking that the hot sun and all that crying had done him in.

I took him in my arms and gave him a drink of water. I wiped his face with my damp palm, and he revived. Then before I knew it, I'd put him to my breast, and he nursed until he was satisfied. Then he looked up at me and giggled a bit before closing his eyes and drifting off to sleep.

On his mother's way back, I stopped her and told her what had happened to the boy. But all she did was snatch him up, forcing him out of his sleep. Then she dragged him off as he stumbled along behind her in tears.

However, the next day he started to follow her again, but then sat on the same rock as before, in front of my tent, and looked at me with his big eyes. He didn't move, but just watched me, playing with the dirt stuck between his little fingers and swallowing the snot running down over his mouth.

I heard my mother, Zulaikha, singing in her Baluchi tongue:

*Ma raw rahurahasirri nandah
Bishukasandahu ma suja bandah
Balkimawtidusta jandah.
I sit along the road waiting,
Plaiting palm leaves, then unplaiting them
In hopes that my love will return.*

Trying to ignore him, I went into my tent to nurse Noria. But as soon as she quietened down and fell asleep, there he was behind me. He approached me and touched my chest, his lips quivering. So I laid him in my lap and gave him my other breast, and as soon as he was full, he started to laugh out loud.

He began doing this every day, laughing when he was full, then falling asleep. My mother, who was blind, said: "This boy has a happy heart", and she named him Dilshad.⁴

I liked the name Dilshad, so I started calling him by it, and so did

Issa, Hussein, and Noria. Then the kids in the neighborhood picked it up and spread it around until the whole neighborhood started calling him Dilshad. As for his mother, I never heard her call him anything. Instead, she let him go without any name at all, as though he were vermin.

Dilshad grew up on my breast milk, playing in front of the tent with Issa, Hussein and Noria, and when I weaned him, I started giving him the cow's milk that I bought from the women of the Rawiya neighborhood, just the way I did my own kids.

But I won't lie—he was an added worry on top of the worry I already had for Issa, Hussein and Noria, and that misguided woman didn't stop once to ask about him. Even so, he would go back to her every evening and sleep in her tent.

Dilshad grew up and, despite being filthy, he turned into a sweet boy with big eyes and a toothy smile. He was always preceded by his laugh, and people felt cheerful when he came around even if they tried to keep him away.

One morning he came running to my tent, screaming and saying his mother had died. So I rushed with him to see her, and we found her dead in her tent, with people gathered around her.

No one knows how Fadila bint Butti died. Some said she'd been bitten by a snake that had slithered into her tent. Others said she'd been found dead deep in the valley, and that some men had dragged her home and thrown her inside her tent, while others said she'd been suffering from a fever for days, and that she'd refused to take the medicine that Ma Sa'ada, wife of Ba Muhammad bin Suwailim, had given her. As for Dilshad, he said that when he woke up, he had found her motionless, lying on her face.

The men buried Fadila bint Butti in the western cemetery, at Jabal Khalalu. Dilshad must have wept bitterly over her, because when he came to our tent at midday, two tracks of dried tears ran down his cheeks through the layers of dust that had accumulated on them. Exhausted from crying, hunger and the hot sun, he stood at the tent door. Then he approached me, and with imploring eyes and a trembling

mouth, asked if he could marry Noria and stay with me, here in this tent.

Smiling in spite of myself, I told him he was an Arab boy and that he should stay where he was. But he cried and repeated what he'd said before about wanting to marry Noria so that he could become a Baluchi like us. Sweet, innocent child! He didn't know that Noria was his sister, and that marriage would never make him a Baluchi.

I tried to help him understand this, but he just started stamping his foot and crying even harder.

Running her hands over the ground, my blind mother crawled over to him on all fours. When she found his feet, her fingers climbed up his body. Then, grasping him by both arms, she pulled him over and sat him down next to her.

"You're not going anywhere," she told him. "You'll stay here with me."

Then, turning to me, she said: "Let him be, Halima . . . Let him be . . . He's an orphan. He's got no one. Besides, he'll be of use to us."

So my mother had her wish, and I had the burden of worrying about Dilshad for the rest of my life.

Dilshad

The four of us were fatherless. We knew nothing about Abd al-Rasoul, the father of Issa, Hussein, and Noria except through the things our mothers said. As we sat gathered around Ma Halima's fire—over which she boiled a lot of water and a little bit of fish—she told us he had gone to Gwadar⁵ to visit his mother, and had never returned to Muscat.

Even so, Abd al-Rasoul provided plenty of benefits even in his absence. Ma Halima used to threaten Issa and Hussein with him when she wanted to discourage them from hanging around with the bad boys, who would steal eggs from her chicken coop in the Rawiya neighborhood, or pinch cheese balls from Khatun Ahmed in the Zadjal neighborhood.

Dilshad

by Bushra Khalfan

Dilshad is set in Muscat, the capital of Oman, in the first half of the twentieth century and the story is divided into three parts, each named after a district of the city. Dilshad, a young native of Muscat, of unknown parentage, grows up in extreme poverty in one of the Balochi areas of the city, experiencing Balochi as well as Arab culture. His daughter Mariam inherits his poverty and carefree nature, and she becomes everything to him, helping him cope with his blindness. However, their dire circumstances drive her to leave home and work in the house of a Muscat merchant, where she is initially content, but finally is forced to run away. *Dilshad* is a novel of hunger, sadness, adventure and love. Its multiple narrators speak different languages, pointing to the cultural diversity of Muscat.



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She'd say: "If people keep on complaining about you, Haji Gambar will go to Gwadar and tell your father everything, and then you'll learn how to behave!" This threat scared us all, although we didn't know anybody named Haji Gambar, in our neighborhood or anywhere else.

If Noria was sad, Ma Halima would try to console her with the hope of seeing her father some day. When she asked about him, she would tell her he was more handsome than Sohrab.⁶ She said he was the mightiest man in the world, so strong he could almost carry the mountains of Muscat on his shoulders, and so brave and capable, he could defeat an entire army single-handedly. She promised the little girl that some day he would come back and bring her beads, mirrors and colored thread.

As for my father, he seemed to exist nowhere but in my mother's angry outbursts. She would fling her curses at me, at the world, and at the bastard her father had married her off to so as to guarantee that she would be taken care of and protected, only to have him "do it" to her and die, leaving her with neither care nor protection, and with a ravenous mouth that she struggled to feed.

That's how the four of us were brought up: on absent fathers and present mothers. Our mothers had their good points and their bad ones, but they guaranteed us the food that would ward off our deaths, or at least postpone them for a time.

Like all the other tents in that neighborhood, Ma Zulaikha's was made of palm fronds with lots of gaps between them that she would fill with dried mud. We'd huddle inside the tent when the weather in Muscat was cold, and sit outside on the da'an that had been set up in front of it when it was hot.⁷

Out of the tent wafted the odors of all sorts of things: from our bodies to the remains of the fish Ma Halima had boiled, then thrown its water out back, to the garbage dumps that ran parallel to the tents, to the fires over which palm tree owners would cook a mixture of fodder, dates, and fish scraps to feed their oxen on nearby farms, and whose smoke would be carried on the wind whenever it blew in off the sea.

Yet cramped as it was, that tent managed to hold all three of us boys,

our bodies packed like sardines on one side, and Noria, who slept between Ma Halima and her mother Ma Zulaikha on the other.

Long before dawn everybody would be awake. Yet even before we opened our eyes, we knew what chores awaited us, and we would set about them with empty stomachs, our eyes half-closed and bleary from the hardship.

Translated by Nancy Roberts

Notes:

- 1 The Banyan merchants are Hindus from the Indian subcontinent who stood out due to their distinctive dress and cultural practices. They trace their origins to certain Urdu-speaking Zoroastrian Parsis who fled to India from Persia (present-day Iran) following the Islamic conquest of that region, and who spread from India into the Arabian Peninsula. The Banyans played a central role in the commerce of Oman for several hundred years as brokers, importers, exporters, retailers, and financiers.
- 2 A long, flowing head covering traditionally worn by Omani women.
- 3 A fictitious character known for her beauty, wealth and high rank.
- 4 Dilshad means “happy-hearted” in Persian.
- 5 Located on the shores of the Arabian Sea opposite Oman, Gwadar is the capital of south Baluchistan, Pakistan. The city was under Omani jurisdiction for nearly 170 years (from 1792–1958 CE), after which the Sultanate ceded it to Pakistan. When this occurred, many of the city’s residents moved to Oman, while numerous merchants left for the Gulf. The Omani presence left a lasting mark on the city, and the ties between the two societies remained strong.
- 6 Sohrab Sepehri, a legendary warrior from the *Shahnameh*.
- 7 Unlike a tent, which is a closed structure, the da’an is a raised, open platform used to sleep on during the summer.

The Prisoner of the Portuguese

by **Mohsine Loukili**



Mohsine Loukili is a Moroccan writer, born in Taza, Morocco, 1978. He has won numerous prizes for plays, short stories and novels. He published his first short story collection *Dawn of Rage* in 2009, then his debut novel *Winds of August* (2013), which was awarded the 2013 Sharjah Award for Arab Creativity. His novel *Rih al-Shirki* (2016) was shortlisted for the Sheikh Zayed Book Award in the Young Author category, and his short story collection *Lostness* (2016) won the Ghassan Kanafani Prize for Narrative.

The Survivor

I was the sole survivor of seven children butchered by my father in the cellar of our house. My mother, who could have kept us from death, had died from hunger and grief a day before the disaster. My father buried her in the hall of the house. He cried for her the whole night long, then went out at dawn and wandered aimlessly in the deserted lanes and alleys of Fez.

With the death of my mother, the world changed for ever.

My brother 'Abd al-Samad, went mad and lost his mind. He couldn't bear the death of my mother, or the hunger. 'Adnan remained confined to his bed. He was supposed to die before my father returned but fate chose that he should die terrified in a massacre. The others went on like sick, lame chickens, walking with one side up and the other side down.

It was the third year of hunger, drought and plague. Suffering never left us. The Spanish and Portuguese were eyeing our country from the sea, while the Turks were making preparations in Algeria to make our country a base for fighting the Christians and crossing over to al-Andalus. We were constantly afflicted by disease; other nations fought over us, we were overcome by hunger, and the plague so bad that we imagined God was wiping out our people from the earth. Whole crowds of people died; civil unrest grew, and people buried each other in mass graves. Victims of disease were neglected and left as corpses with no proper burials or funerals. Towns and cities were sites of total desolation, and terror grew in the desert, even reaching inhabited areas in the mountains. Places were empty of people or animals walking or moving about. The elite paid no attention to ordinary people, preferring hatred and grudges and hatching plots; the rulers would no sooner finish one war before fanning the flames of another conflict in their feverish struggle for power and domination; while the masses paid no attention to the elite, but occupied themselves with murder, rape and petty theft.

My father went out and wandered. We were in need of him. My

mother's death had left behind a huge gap. And we were in need of protection from hunger, infection and fear of the unknown.

No dreams, sir, in the nights of drought and famine.

In times of plague, the moon waters the roofs of houses with more sorrow. Between one house and the next, the spaces crowd together and the darkness grows more intense. The moon lurks far from our pains. It appears full and round, like the eye of God. A large eye; but it sees and does not intervene, it looks but it does not care. The poor wretches continue to be plunged into the darkness of fear, their hearts surrounded by devils, on their inevitable pathway to death.

The moon of disease, which does not comfort, but rather kindles sorrows.

I crouched in the hall during the daylight hours, waiting for my father to return. My mother was afraid that my father might die outside the house. "Death on the road is a disgrace," she repeated time after time. I was afraid for him, for my brothers, and for myself. He was our only remaining hope.

I waited for a long time. The mountains blew the wind through the lanes of Fez. There were no leaves on the trees to fly away. The last leaves had dropped more than two years ago. Only the dust moved, in storms or without them, filling the sky with a frightening dark colour.

Wind and dust were our whole share of the winter months.

My father appeared on the threshold with the sunset. The wind dropped and the sun took refuge behind the mountains. 'Abd al-Samad jumped like a monkey, barefoot and naked, a child with no shadow. My father seized him by the hand, dragged him across the yard, and down the steps to the cellar, killed him there and returned.

'Abd al-Samad was the first bridegroom in the wedding procession of death.

Between my father going down to the cellar and coming back up to the hall, he had lost several years. His beard had turned white and streaks of it had crept into his hair.

The sunset became more oppressive as the sun retreated. A harsh cold descended, and the few clouds departed, chasing the threads of

light that had clung on, in twisting lanes, fleeing from the wavering night of Fez.

Everything is fleeing our land, sir. The rain has stopped, the orchards have disappeared, the birds have left and the seasons are cancelled. The last of the flowers were stripped bare years ago. Ayyub, my youngest brother, and the unluckiest as well, never knew flowers. He died without having picked a rose.

God is no longer here. God may be somewhere else on the earth but he is certainly not here.

Ayyub reached the age of three, opened his eyes on the drought and was filled with a wish to get to know the fertile part of the earth. My mother was depressed and no longer thought of anything except getting enough to eat. He would come to her and she would smile at him until he let her go. He went around all the rooms of the house. The walls threw him back and faces rejected him so he would sit beside me in the hall, smiling and only speaking when he saw he would be accepted. I smiled in his face and he asked: "What are fields like?"

Some weeks he asked me a hundredth time. He dreamed of another land but he didn't stay to live it. He died, taking with him buried dreams.

I would speak with authority, to please him and not to shatter his dreams. I would nod my head and he would be happy. I would answer and he would wander with the words.

"Fields are areas of open land that are spread over the plain, and extend higher and higher up into the hills and mountains. They are cultivated by peasants and abound in blessings and good things. Wheat, durra and fig trees are plentiful there, as well as vines and olives. In springtime, when the weather is fine, neither too hot nor too cold, the roses fill them with colour, and there are many butterflies, watered by spring water in channels that are opened at special times so that each field may take a sufficient allocation of water. In the summer, their colour changes to yellow and they become hard. The peasants harvest them, storing one third, selling one third, and giving away a third to the poor and homeless."

My father lit the lamp. He gathered us in the hall, as he used to do with the sheep that he brought from the farm a little before Eid. Ayyub cried so he hit him with the handle of his knife. He broke his jaw and he was silent. We were still as statues, and our shadows tried to resist the fear of death. ‘Adnan leaned backwards and fell on his back. He had been racked by illness for months and could no longer stand. My father lifted him onto his shoulder like a sack and led us down into the cellar. In the dim light of the lamp we saw ‘Abd al-Samad – his neck had been slashed from one side to the other.

“Shh!” said my father, before we could scream. He spoke in a quiet, confident voice, like a man on a sacred mission: “Women are the only ones who can produce fear of death!”

Even today, my heart is still full of the darkness in that cellar, sir, and the faces of my brothers hover around me whenever I put my head on the pillow. The same smell: of damp, shit and blood.

But Ayyub burst into tears. I gave him my hand and he took it. My father dragged ‘Isa by his hair as I whispered in Ayyub’s ear: “Shut your eyes, I’ll tell you about the fields.”

He moved his head, wiped away his tears and shut his eyes. “Fields are areas of open land that are spread over the plain, and extend higher and higher up the hills and mountains. They are cultivated by peasants and abound in blessings and good things. Wheat, durra and fig trees are plentiful there, as well as vines and olives. In springtime . . .”

My father snatched him from my side. Ayyub kept his eyes shut as I raised my voice: “When the weather is fine, neither too hot nor too cold, the roses fill them with colour, and there are many butterflies, watered by spring water in channels that are opened at special times so that each field may take a sufficient allocation of water . . .”

Then my father slaughtered him. He didn’t resist. He died with his eyes closed, dreaming of fields, spring and butterflies.

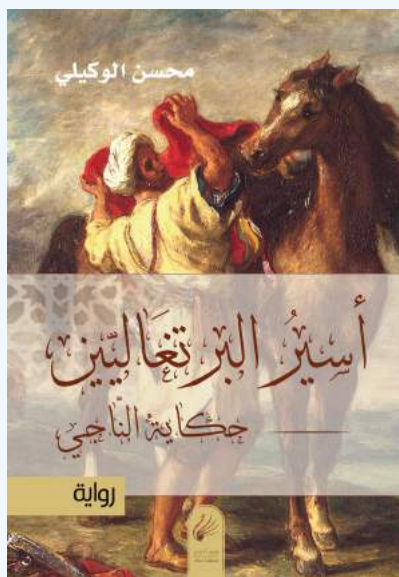
The winds must take his soul far away, for angels were not created for hell.

My father slaughtered all my brothers, one after the other. They were submissive, perhaps they even wanted to die. When he looked

The Prisoner of the Portuguese

by Mohsine Loukili

This is the story of a simple man who leaves Fez and goes to the countryside looking for work, only to find himself a prisoner in a Portuguese jail on the North African coast, leaving behind a wife and three children. However, he bargains with his jailer, telling him stories to avoid the firing squad. He must tell a story which pleases the jailor or face execution. The novel thus follows in parallel the stories told by the prisoner and the main narrative. The novel illuminates a difficult period in the history of Morocco in the sixteenth century, torn by the struggle between the Saadis and the Marinids and the Portuguese occupation, while also exploring feelings of fear, expectation, love, hatred and the desire for revenge.



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in my direction, the light went out. A quiet, reflective lowing could be heard, like a shadow at evening's end. Under the faint light of the sky, I glimpsed my father going upstairs from the cellar to the hall. To this day, I don't know why he spared me. Perhaps it was the light of the lamp, which went out and kept me from death.

Ibrahim left the house and I climbed up the stairs. I slipped out through the half-open front door. There was no one in the lanes of Fez. No angels, no devils. I passed through the Bou Jeloud gate. The wind breathed the drought of the mountain paths. Night had fallen and the moon risen, scattering its crippled light. Many bodies could be seen on both sides of the road. I continued to run, worried that my father's hand might take me back to the cellar.

I ran a lot.

"Get away, child, your mother has died, and your father gone mad, you have no one left. Go further, and do not turn back. Death is there, behind you!"

My body stiffened and I began to feel heavy. The earth swayed below me as the dry trees collapsed around me and my heart was almost split in two.

"You will not die, my child, keep calm," I heard my mother say. "You will remain after me and have children who will fill the quarters of Fez with noise." I stopped and turned around but could not find anyone. As I turned to lie on my back, I had only the earth to support me. I saw the moon shining brightly as it moved on its course; the clouds smiled as they hurried past, and the stars glistened amid the darkness.

It was a magical, hateful sky."

Translated by Paul Starkey

The White Line of Night

by Khalid Al-Nassrallah



Khalid Al-Nassrallah is a Kuwaiti writer and novelist, born in 1987. He obtained a BA in Physical Education and has worked as a teacher in the Kuwaiti Ministry of Education. He has published numerous articles in the Kuwaiti *Al-Wasat* and *Al-Qabas* newspapers. He won first place in the Short Stories on the Air competition organized by *Al-Araby* magazine, and his novel *The Highest Depth* was longlisted for the Sheikh Zayed Book Award in 2017.

From Chapter 2

I constructed towering piles of comics by my bed and stashed the really good ones in drawers. I was afraid for them because of my father, who had nothing but contempt for comics. He thought they were a sign of some tragic crisis that would only get worse as I got older and the number of comics grew. “They don’t suit you anymore,” he would say impatiently, then add firmly, “Don’t get any more.” Sometimes he would just gesture with his palm and a sweep of his arm, pursing his lips and shaking his head. I understood what he meant but ignored it. Still, I was scared that one day he would take the comics without my knowing and burn them. Sometimes I listened in when he related his concern and sorrow to my mother: “It’s a real problem. You have to persuade him to join a sports club, a religious group, anything.” The conversation would usually end with him blaming her: “It’s all your fault.” When I was a kid, my mother would take me to the offices of a comic that was a supplement to a leading newspaper. Whenever I remembered that office, with its clean beige carpet and pictures of the characters in white frames on the wall, I felt a surge of warmth. I would hand in my entry for a competition and receive some special issues, either old ones or new ones prior to their going on sale. Whenever I pictured the mailbox on the wall outside our house that would conceal new issues every month, I felt a rare pleasure. That is, until my father found an excuse and removed it.

Outside the house nobody knew about my passion, not even Aliwi, who did notice I was the only one interested in reading the stories from the Fasa’il series that they handed out at library sessions. He had no idea that they were my great love. At the beginning of the third year in high school we would meet up at a food store halfway between

our homes. Whoever got there first would wait for the other and then we would go to the bus station that split the neighbourhood in two. The start of the school year was an unpleasant and infuriating time marked by constant silly instructions, advice and scenes, and so we decided to treat every day as if it were the weekend. I shared many interests with Aliwi, despite genuine fundamental differences and the individuality of our ideas and opinions. As the winter term approached, night gradually encroached on day and the sun hastened its withdrawal from the expanse of the sky. We usually bought a pack of cigarettes, chewing gum, a bottle of water or an occasional fizzy drink, before going to catch the bus that took us south towards a commercial district close to the sea. Drivers didn't stop for kids our age, expecting we would cause trouble, and that made us play a trick. We would persuade someone at the bus stop to help us. We would stand to one side, but as soon as the door of the bus opened, we'd jump on.

Conversation wasn't Aliwi's strong point. He had to start or end what he was saying with a swearword. Neither did he take much care of his clothes, which were full of cigarette burns. He found it hard to manage his money and his time too. But he was good at jokes and could be good company. Back then we were mad about playing snooker. Billiard halls had spread like the plague in a feeble effort to replicate the mood of shady bars. Still, they met the needs of people like us wishing to escape and kill time. We would play for at least an hour, or for as long as we could afford. Our skills really improved. We could get out of snookers or hit the bottom of the white, making it jump and hit the target. Other pots required a delicate touch. Afterwards we would go to a fast-food place nearby and end up sitting outside at an ordinary coffeshop. We would watch films and football matches on a big screen TV at the front. On one occasion, in the usual tranquillity of the cafe once we'd run out of stories, jokes and disputes, when we'd be relaxing in our seats absorbed in an endless chain of cigarettes we lit and stubbed out to kill the last hour of the day, Aliwi suddenly stood up to greet someone. That wasn't like him. With visible lethargy I shifted in my seat and stood up to shake hands. From his appearance the guy

looked as though he came from a rich family and was well educated. The light from the overhead bulbs showed a hint of blond to his hair that was parted to the right with a distinct wave. Tall and quite thin, he was dressed like Tintin on one of his adventures. The tone of his voice was firm and steady and he used unfamiliar words. It seemed impossible that he could be a friend of Aliwi's, who invited him to sit down. The guy tried to say no, explaining that he was due to meet someone, and he started looking around in search of his companion. Then he asked if there was another café nearby. I said no at once. He looked anxiously at his watch, and said: "I guess he might come now." Aliwi insisted he sit down until the other guy arrived. He was trapped. Aliwi put out his cigarette as soon as he sat down, smiled politely and said: "I know you don't like smoke." The guy confirmed this gratefully: "I hate it. If I wasn't meeting someone I wouldn't have come here." He grasped his shirt and continued: "The smell clings and keeps coming off. I don't know how I'm going to explain it to my father when . . ." He cut himself short, bringing his shirt up to his nose. Till then I hadn't put my cigarette out and did not intend to comply. To lighten things up Aliwi responded: "Any old lie will do." It seemed the two knew each other well.

Aliwi usually spoke slowly. He stretched out his words and used convoluted expressions to convey a simple idea. But in this conversation he digressed and posed many questions. He started reminiscing about situations and people before informing me – for a reason known only to him when he thought I was listening – that his friend had a private collection of old animated films and a museum's worth of related memorabilia. The guy gave a shy smile and said it was an exaggeration to call it a museum. He seemed pretty wary. I was watching a film about a yuppie obsessed with multiple relationships with women while Aliwi and his friend were deep in conversation about people I didn't know. I had settled back into my chair and didn't pay them any attention until the guy responded in a way that was exasperated and polite at the same time: "You're like King Zincar." Then he gave a shy smile. What he said made me curious and I started looking at them. I

wondered if the expression was in vogue. I understood that what he meant was you're poking your nose into other people's business. I felt an intense sense of distaste. Aliwi said impatiently: "Haven't you stopped using those weird names yet?" Something pushed me to join in their conversation, and without any preliminaries, I said: "King Zincar and Dhaw al-Nahar?" Aliwi's laughter resounded around us. I knew he could overdo his reactions at times, but he had taken what I said as a joke. At the time, though, I sensed that his friend was very innocent. To me he seemed like a little boy unaware of the possible consequences of his actions. I saw amazement in his eyes when I said the full name of the story, but he stopped talking and I also swallowed my tongue so as not to spill what I knew about children's stories. Aliwi came back to his senses. Perhaps he felt that he had hurt his friend's feelings, and put things straight by saying: "I apologise. It won't happen again, I promise." It seemed he got a lot of criticism for his emotional outbursts. To lighten the mood, I said: "My father has been mad about books since he was a kid. He's still got loads of kids' comics." Our friend's eyes lit up and he gestured his astonishment at what he was hearing. "He could join in with your museum of memorabilia," I added. He laughed, but it was a fake, forced response. In fact the story he had referred to when venting his annoyance with Aliwi wasn't particularly special, old or well known, and I thought I was the only person to still remember it. Stories from twenty years back were long, full of details, and took hours, if not days, to read. Today's material was the opposite: not many words, few pages and lots of illustrations. For that reason the classics were memorable. I was convinced that the polite guy shared my passion.

We always took a taxi home so as not to be late. As we were leaving the café, Aliwi told me that the sad guy had not stopped being a child who only talked about cartoon films and collected mementos, tapes, pictures and comics, and was always on the lookout for more. He would even go on trips for such things. A weirdo, who might travel ten hours just to attend conferences or exhibitions about old animations or their writers. He believed they were true and thought he

The White Line of Night by Khalid Al-Nassrallah

Since childhood, the main protagonist of *The White Line of Night* has been obsessed by reading. As a young child, he would search for words and forage for scraps of paper containing letters and expressions. When he leaves school to begin work, he gets a job as copy editor in the Department of Published Works. However, at work, he is often disturbed and pained when he has to ban a book. It annoys him to have to refuse books which he likes, so he ends up breaking the rules. In the novel's atmosphere of political dystopia, the authorities are in conflict with the people. The hero plays an important role in dramatic events which build up to a climactic, shocking finale.



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might one day run into a cartoon character and they could share memories of glories past. Aliwi's mocking laughter punctuated every other word, while the whole way back I was thinking about the possibility of speaking openly, even if only about part of what I loved and kept hidden. I had been looking for a way of broaching the subject for a while and longed to reveal myself to someone. Perhaps if I told him that I was mad about drawing when I was little, that I copied objects and scenes, that I tried to depict any situation or event on paper. I drew my room, an advertising poster, a plate of food, or the dining table with my father at the head and my mother next to him. I would do that naturally and happily, making use of illustrated stories and copying their pictures in my notebook. Things like King Zincar's horse who got lost with him in the forest when he went out hunting, the boat of the riverman whom Dhaw al-Nahar called upon to help him get to the princess of the mountains, the giant frog that sealed up the well of the village that was the Spring of Life, or the enormous serpent that ate the roots of the Tree of Eternity. A never-ending succession of images flashed through my imagination, flaring up, dying down, coming back. Image after image. I didn't think that the polite guy felt entirely comfortable when he was revealing all that touched his emotions. But I wasn't like that quiet guy, as I was always pretending to be something other than what was inside me. A few minutes before the taxi reached the spot where one of us would get out and walk home to spare paying extra to the driver, I thought about reminding Aliwi of my first love, the stories in the Fasa'il series from our library sessions, as an entryway to a full confession. That would mean I could ask him for help if I needed it one day. All the things we keep secret in our relationships are a cause for annoyance, half-open doors that we wish we could shut or fling open. I failed that time. Aliwi went home without my finding an excuse to open the subject. I needed an injection of courage to find the way in I was looking for.

That night I thought a lot about the polite guy. He had provided a golden opportunity to rid myself of the shame directed at me every day in my father's looks and words, to rid myself of the shame that so-

ciety promised me if someone should discover that I read children's stories, comics and cartoons, of the mockery that might accompany me for the rest of my life, the impression left in people's minds years later that wouldn't disappear even when you had. A sleepless night then, a mixture of determination, regret and hope. A rush of feelings compounded with an idea that had been bouncing around since childhood: "They are deeper and vaster than they think." Two days later, an unknown number called. It seemed like a sign that heaven was on my side: the polite guy.

Translated by Raphael Cohen

Bread on Uncle Milad's Table by Mohammed Alnaas



Mohammed Alnaas is a short story writer and journalist from Libya, born in 1991. He obtained a BA in Electrical Engineering from the University of Tripoli in 2014. His short story collection *Blue Blood* was published in 2020. *Bread on Uncle Milad's Table* (2021) is his first novel.

The bakery is where I was raised to be patient, gentle, focused, observant, and respectful of time. I still remember the first loaf I ever baked. As usual, I had been watching my father, my chin balanced on the squeegee handle, observing him from a distance, swept up in his love affair with bread. Sunbeams slip through the sooty glass panes casting shadows through the bakery, crisscrossing with the suspended swarm of flour motes. He blows off the flour coating his palms, and steps away from the dough, allowing it to rise slowly. He wets his hands. Caressing the warm flowing water, he considers the sunbeams waltzing with the white specks. After washing his hands, he wipes them on a towel specifically set aside for this.

Sensing my eyes on him, he calls out to me: “Milad, come here. Bring a kilo of flour, and some Khadduja – there’s a small jar I prepared for you over there.”

I scamper over like any young boy who knows that the minutes to come will be worth their weight in gold. Despite how rough and harsh he is, how he never says “I love you”, there are moments with my father that I know are a reflection of the love that’s pooled deep in his heart. To this day, whenever I bake bread I feel my father next to me, his enormous, cracked, flour-dusted, henna-coloured hands guiding me.

With a bounce in my step, I make my way back and hand him the flour and some Khadduja, Khadduja being the yeast that my father has looked after every day since the 1940s. Back then it was nicknamed Valentina. Looking after Valentina was one of the first tasks he was ever assigned when baking bread for his Italian instructor. My father unties his apron and puts it over my head. The apron swallows me up, and I almost begin to dance inside of it, like a small, delicate mouse. He seats me on the plastic chair before we start. Crouching down, he stares at me, and places his hands on mine. He tries to impart to me what he is feeling.

“Do you know what the pleasure is in baking bread?”

“What?”

“With just four common ingredients – flour, water, yeast and salt –

you can make wonders of all shapes and textures. Nothing beats bread as a staple, nothing else tastes quite like it.”

“How?”

“The secret lies here,” he points to his heart. “And here,” he points to his head. “And here,” he opens up his hands. “Though a thousand bakers could use the same method, with the exact same steps, yet you’ll still find yourself preferring one bread over the other. Why? It’s all about the heart, Milad. Some people don’t put love in their bread. Love is the fifth component. And what’s the sixth?”

“Uh . . . the oven?”

“Don’t be stupid, the oven is nothing more than a tool. It’s the air we breathe. Bread, when it’s at the dough stage, is a living being like us; it breathes, it moves, it’s full of feeling. If the dough’s angry, your bread will be spoiled. It could turn out airy, or just as easily, turn out dense.”

“Okay, so flour, yeast, water, salt, love, and air. I’m ready.”

“Hardly. There’s more, something that gives bread its unique taste, can you guess what it is?”

I rack my brains.

“Time. The time that it takes the dough to respond, to rise, after you’ve worked on it, is essential. You’ve got to be precise; every kind of bread has a specific time for its taste to develop. You must not bake your bread before it’s ready, but don’t leave it for too long, either. Bread is like us, its water can run out.”

“Our water runs out?”

“Of course, that’s why we drink it every day.”

“So then, you can add water to the dough if it gets too dry?”

“No, no. The water you use at the beginning of the process is the only water that you can add to bread.”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“Just one more thing. Every bread requires different quantities. Think about how much flour you’ll need for the bread you want to make, and then calculate every other ingredient as a percentage of the flour’s weight. They’ve taught you percentages in maths, right?”

“Yes, it was confusing at first, but I’ve got it now.”

“So, it’ll be easy for you to understand what I’m about to say. Milad, my boy, listen to me. Starting from tomorrow, don’t come here to the bakery unless you’ve got your notebook and pen with you. You’re my son, and half of this place will go to you after I’m gone, and the rest to your uncle. The recipes that I’m known for must carry on with you. Your uncle’s a businessman, all he cares about is money. He’s my brother and I know him well. So you’re responsible for how good the bread turns out. You’ve got the most important job. What really matters is not whether a baker has his own bakery, but his own recipes. This is what sets us, Golden Grains, apart: the recipes I use were passed down to me, and I picked up a few others along the way.”

“But I’ve never seen your recipes.”

“It’s all here, in my head.”

I still remember this entire conversation by heart. I stored it up, let it ripen, and relived it thousands of times.

I take a kilo of flour, tip it on the counter, and add some salt. I mix them both together well until the salt has disappeared into the flour.

“Make the ring in the middle, like this,” he says as he shapes the flour with his index and middle finger. “Don’t mix the yeast with the salt directly; they’re like men and women.” He guides my hand, until I sculpt the entire ring. “When you first mix the yeast with the water, you’ll know then whether it’s alive or not. If you’re still unsure, leave it for a few minutes. If you see a few bubbles, then it’s in good shape.” He carries on with his explanation while I combine the yeast with water, equalling two thirds of the flour I used. Then I pour a little bit of the mixture in the middle of the ring and work it into some flour, until the dough begins to take shape. After that he takes over, folding the top of it towards him and firmly pushing down and away with the heels of his hands. “Sometimes you have to knead the dough for it to really come along well. In some recipes you don’t need it, time will do the job, or a mixer will take the load off your hands, but if you want to be like me, then you won’t use it much. A skilled baker knows how to make bread without a machine.”

“Okay, so now let it rest, get some air. We’ll put a cloth over it, and let it only breathe in the air from the bowl. Too much air will dry it out, while not enough air will kill it. Your love for it isn’t just about letting it breathe, and observing it, but also about giving it the right environment – think about what will make it perfetto, or complete, because actually, perfection is God’s alone.”

We spend the morning waiting for the dough to rise. My father sits me down next to him as though he is making out his will to me. In his eyes, I’m now grown. He puts the tea pot on the fire, and gives Usta Khmayyis, the supervisor, his tasks for the day. My uncle would always arrive in the afternoon, so the main tasks would go to the more experienced Khmayyis, from the city of Testour in Tunisia, who had also been brought up on baking bread. My father takes out two cigarettes. He offers me one of them. I am still a teenager back then. My hand hesitates to hold the cigarette, my eyes cautiously looking at it.

“Come on, have one. Smoking with me is better than you smoking with people I don’t know.”

“I don’t smoke.”

“Don’t lie to me, boy. My pack is nearly empty. Lying and stealing are bigger sins than smoking. You hear me?”

“Yes.”

Of course, I would steal a cigarette from his pack now and then. Sport cigarettes, or what we started calling Riyadi after they were nationalised. I light my cigarette in front of him, my hand trembling. My father was the kind of man who could tolerate anything except lying and stealing. As we sit outside the bakery, he begins smoking, taking in the whole scene. Facing the bakery was an oasis of lofty palms, forming a wall around the orchards of his distant cousins. Before the concrete sprawl took over the whole place, there were navel oranges, bitter oranges, blood oranges, and mandarins, sweeter than any I’d ever tasted. As the sun lazily makes its way to rise, the fear I’d harboured and the respect I’d held for my father, evaporate. As I take my first drag of the cigarette, my jittery hands gradually steady. I look at my father’s face, and read the signs of utter fatigue from days past.

“Don’t ever steal, Milad, and don’t lie, or cheat or be a hypocrite. Living as you are is better than anything else in this world.”

Then, he tells me about his first time baking bread. My grandfather was a friend to an Italian signore whose farm he worked on, planting wheat and olives. The signore found my father helping my grandfather out on the farm, and decided to whisk him away to the city to learn how to bake bread. Back then, my father was fifteen years old. He shares his shock at what the city looked like when he saw it for the first time, and how from then on he forgot all about his small village. At first, he’d go back two days a week, then one week a month, then one day a month, until he finally married my mother, who was also his cousin. He lived in the Al-Dahra neighbourhood in Tripoli. Mixing with the Italians, he got to know their language, dressed like them and frequented their cinemas. He smoked their cigarettes and drank their coffee. His work in the bakery was to bake and sell, which earned him many friends; he was trusted by Arabs, Maltese, Italians and Jews alike.

“Whoever knows your bread, whenever he sees you, his stomach will rumble. Make your bread with love, and people will grow to love it and you, Milad.”

“What does that even mean? Make my bread with love?”

“You’ll understand when you’re older. What matters is that I’ve noticed some softness in you – you need to toughen up. Your sisters will need a man next to them soon. I’ve grown old and can’t handle the heat of the oven, or working all day in the bakery anymore.”

“I’m always with them: I chat with them, and Safa even taught me how to braid Asma’s hair.”

“What? God, give me strength. Stupid boy, you’re a man. Men aren’t meant to keep company with women. They’re like salt and yeast, don’t you get it? But you keep pushing it – playing with your sister’s hair!”

“S... s ...sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

“What else do you do with them?”

“Nothing, nothing.”

“What did I tell you about lying?”

“Right . . . Okay, well, I sit with them and listen to them talking

Bread on Uncle Milad's Table by Mohammed Alnaas

In the closed society of his village, Milad strives to live up to the definition of ideal masculinity, as his society views it. However, after all his best efforts, he fails to be 'a man', and after meeting his sweet-heart and wife-to-be, Zeinab, decides to forget about this definition and be himself. Living at home, he performs the tasks which his society reserves for women, while Zeinab works and supports the family. Milad is unaware of how he is mocked in the village until his nephew breaks it to him. *Bread on Uncle Milad's Table* questions static ideas of gender and champions the individual in the face of destructive ideas adopted by the majority.



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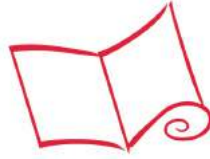
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about the neighbours and life on the farm. We bake biscuits, and sometimes I buy them their sanitary pads.”

“What?” he splutters.

I’ll never forget the way my cheek throbbed that day. It stung more than my sergeant’s slaps and kicks. My father pulled me in close and ordered me to stop spending time with my sisters. “You’re only meant to guard them or order them around as a father would.” On top of that, he wanted to see me in the bakery all day long. I should study there and do my homework there, I could only go home to sleep, eat, or do some household chores. His eyes were dull with disappointment and regret at having a son like me, as if he had something to do with it. My father had tried to have another son, but Asma foiled his plans – she should have been a boy, but having girls ran in our family. My father had six sisters, and he was the middle child. He also had a brother who was younger than all of them. My mother told me that both of my grandfathers were the only two sons of my great grandfather, who had fifteen daughters by two different wives. And so, my father was particularly sensitive about how many women were in our family. On the one hand, he wished I had never told him what I got up to, but on the other, he blamed himself. His face drained of colour – though, thanks to the effects of the oven heat on his skin, the change was not so noticeable. The silence between us was only disturbed when the alarm bell went off, announcing that my dough was ready for shaping.

Translated by Sawad Hussain



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INTERNATIONAL PRIZE FOR ARABIC FICTION

The 2022 Judging Panel

CHAIR OF JUDGES



SHUKRI MABKHOUT is a critic, novelist and academic, born in Tunis in 1962. He holds a state doctorate in Arabic Language and Literature from Manouba University, Tunisia. He currently teaches at the Zayed University in the UAE and supervises its Endowed Chair of Arabic Language. In addition to several books of literary criticism and linguistics, he is the author of novels and short stories. His most well-known fictional work is *The Italian*, which

won the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2015 and has been translated into English and Italian.

MEMBERS OF THE PANEL

ASHUR ETWEBI is a doctor, poet, translator and painter. He was born in the old town of Tripoli, Libya, in 1952. As a young man, he also spent several years making traditional Libyan silver jewellery. He has worked

as a consultant and a Professor of Internal Medicine in many teaching hospitals in Libya and was a co-founder of the National Cancer Institute, Sabratha, Libya. He has published 14 poetry collections, a novel and seven books of translation. Selections of his poetry have been published in English and French (two books in each language) and one book in Polish.



IMAN HUMAYDAN is a Lebanese writer, researcher and academic. She is the co-founder and current President of PEN Lebanon, and a board member of PEN International. She has worked in the field of cultural journalism and published four novels: *B as in Beirut*, *Wild Mulberries*, *Other Lives* and *The Weight of Paradise*. These have been

translated into many languages; most recently, Armenian and Georgian. Her last novel, *The Weight of Paradise*, won the Katara Prize, and its French translation was shortlisted for the 2017 Prix de la littérature arabe awarded by the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris. Her writings tackle post-war and gender issues, memory, identity, language and migration. She aims to make women writers' voices audible. Humaydan has also edited a collection of 15 short stories about Beirut entitled *Beirut Noir*, translated into English and published in 2015 by the New York publisher Akashic Books. She collaborated in writing the screenplay for the film "Here Comes the Rain", which was based on her academic research on families of those who disappeared during the Lebanese civil war. The film won numerous Lebanese and international awards. Another screenplay, "Asmahan, Une Diva Orientale", focused on the life of the Lebanese singer Asmahan. Between 2007 and 2014,

she taught creative writing at the University of Iowa and, since 2015, has taught creative writing at the Paris 8 University Saint Denis, France. She lives between Paris and Beirut.



SAADIAH MUFARREH is a poet, critic, writer and cultural consultant from Kuwait. She is the author of over 20 books of poetry and literary criticism, and her poems have been translated into a number of languages. She was chosen by the British newspaper, *The Guardian*, to represent Kuwait on a global map of poetry, and the ‘Poets of the World’ movement also made her an ambassador of Kuwaiti poetry. She has

been on the judging panels of several Kuwaiti and Arab prizes for Arabic literature, and has won Kuwaiti, Arab and international awards. Her writing is studied in universities in Kuwait and abroad, as part of Masters and Doctoral theses on modern Arabic literature.

BAIAN RAYHANOVA is Professor of Arabic Literature at Sofia University, Bulgaria. She completed her higher education at the Moscow Institute for Oriental Studies, part of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and obtained a PhD in Modern Arabic Literature in the late 1980s. Since then, she has worked at Sofia University and has also been a guest lecturer at universities in Norway, the USA, Algeria, Tunisia, Syria and other countries. She is the author of several monographs, textbooks and articles on modern Arabic literature published in different languages and she has translated many works by contemporary Arab writers.



The Translators

RAPHAEL COHEN is a professional translator and lexicographer who studied Arabic and Hebrew at Oxford and the University of Chicago. He has translated a growing number of novels by contemporary Arab authors including *Guard of the Dead* by George Yarak (Hoopoe Fiction, 2019) which was short-listed for the 2016 IPAF prize, *Status Emo* by Eslam Mosbah (AUC Press, 2013), *Butterfly Wings: an Egyptian Novel* by Mohamed Salmawy (AUC Press, 2014), two novels of Ahlem Mosteghanemi – *The Art of Forgetting* (Bloomsbury, 2011) and *The Bridges of Constantine* (Bloomsbury, 2014), and *So You May See* by Mona Prince (AUC Press 2011). He has introduced and translated *Poems of Alexandria and New York* by Ahmed Morsi, and translated *The Madness of Despair* by Ghalya F T Al Said (both Banipal Books, 2021). He is a contributing editor of Banipal magazine, has contributed translations of short stories and poetry to a range of anthologies and magazines, and translates books and articles in the humanities and social sciences. He is based in Cairo.

SAWAD HUSSAIN is an Arabic-English translator and has contributed translations to journals such as *ArabLit* and *Asymptote*. She co-edited the Arabic-English section of the *Oxford Arabic Dictionary* (2014), and has lectured at IAIS at the University of Exeter, taught KS3 & KS4 Arabic in Johannesburg and Dubai. Her recent book translations include *Mama Hissa's Mice* by Saud Alsanousi (2019), *Passage to the Plaza* by Sahar Khalifeh (2020), *A Bed for the King's Daughter* by Shahla Ujayli (2021), *Crossing Embers* by Badria Al Shihhi (2021), *Catalogue of a Private Life* by Najwa Bin Shatwan (2021) and *The Dance of the Deep-Blue Scorpion* by Akram Musallam (2021). She holds an MA in Modern Arabic Literature from SOAS, London.

NANCY ROBERTS is the translator of Egyptian author Salwa Bakr's *The Man from Bashmour*, (commended for the 2008 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation), with her latest translation being *Things I Left Behind* by Palestinian author Shada Mustafa (Banipal Books, 2022), shortlisted for the 2021 Sheikh Zayed Book Award in the Young Author category. She has translated a number of fiction works by Egyptian authors, including *The Mirage* by Naguib Mahfouz, Mohamed el-Bisatie's *Over the Bridge* and Hala El-Badry's

Muntaha, all with AUC Press. She has translated four novels by Syrian author Ghada Samman, *Farewell, Damascus*, *The Night of the First Billion*, *Beirut Nightmares* and *Beirut '75*, the latter winning the University of Arkansas Arabic Translation Award for best manuscript. Other translations include *House of El-Deeb* by Ezzat el Kamhawi, *Days of Ignorance* by Laila Aljohani, *Chaos of the Senses* by Ahlem Mosteghanemi, and three novels by Ibrahim Nasrallah, *Gaza Weddings*, *The Lanterns of the King of Galilee* and *Time of White Horses*, for which she was awarded the 2018 Sheikh Hamad Prize for Translation and International Understanding. The Arabic original of *Time of White Horses* was short-listed for the 2009 IPAF.

CHIP ROSSETTI has translated several works of Arabic fiction, including *Animals in Our Days* by Mohamed Makhzangi, *Beirut, Beirut* by Sonallah Ibrahim, *Utopia* by Ahmed Khaled Towfik, and the graphic novel *Metro: A Story of Cairo* by Magdy El Shafee. He holds a PhD in Arabic Literature from the University of Pennsylvania and is Editorial Director of the Library of Arabic Literature. His short translations have appeared in the *White Review*, *Asymptote*, *Banipal* and *Words Without Borders*.

PAUL STARKEY was a judge on the inaugural year of IPAF and is an award-winning translator. He is Emeritus Professor of Arabic at Durham University, Chair of the Banipal Trust for Arab Literature and a contributing editor of *Banipal*. His books and articles include a study of Tawfiq al-Hakim entitled *From the Ivory Tower* (1987); *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature* (edited, with Julie Meisami, 1998), *Modern Arabic Literature* (2006), and a study of Sonallah Ibrahim *Rebel with a Pen* (EUP, 2016). He has also translated numerous short stories and novels into English, including works by Rashid al-Daif (*Dear Mr Kawabata*), Edwar al-Kharrat (*Stones of Bobello*), Turki al-Hamad (*Shumaisi*), Mansoura Ez Eldin (*Maryam's Maze*), Jurji Zaydan (*Saladin and the Assassins*), Mahdi Issa al-Saqr (*East Winds, West Winds*), and Adania Shibli (*We Are All Equally Far From Love*). His translation of *The Book of the Sultan's Seal: Strange Incidents from History in the City of Mars* by Youssef Rakha (2014) was awarded the 2015 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation. His most recent translations include *Sarajevo Firewood* by Saïd Khatibi (2021), whose Arabic original was shortlisted for the 2021 IPAF, *Praise for the Women of the Family* by Mahmoud Shukair (shortlisted for the 2016 IPAF) and *The Shell* by Mustafa Khalifa, for which he was awarded the 2017 Sheikh Hamad Award for Translation.

JONATHAN WRIGHT is an award-winning translator of three IPAF winners: Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (IPAF 2014), Saud Alsanousi's *The Bamboo Stalk* (IPAF 2013), which also won the 2016 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize, and Youssef Ziedan's *Azazeel* (IPAF 2009), which was joint winner of the 2013 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize, as well as Hassan Blasim's *The Iraqi Christ* (2014 Independent Foreign Fiction Prize). His latest translations include *Here Is A Body* by Basma Abdel Aziz (2021) and Hassan Blasim's *God 99* (2020, shortlisted for the 2021 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize) and *The Egyptian Assassin* by Ezzedine Choukri Fishere (2020). He studied Arabic, Turkish and Islamic History at St. John's College, Oxford University and worked for many years as a journalist in the Arab world including Tunisia, Oman, Lebanon and Egypt. He was a judge of the 2014 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize. Other translations include works by Khaled el-Khamissi, Rasha al-Ameer, Fahd al-Atiq, Alaa el-Aswany, Galal Amin and Bahaa Abdelmegid, as well as the 2019 Man Booker International Prize shortlisted short story collection *Jokes for the Gunmen* by Mazen Maarouf, two IPAF shortlisted novels – Hamour Ziada's *The Longing of the Dervish* (2015 prize) and Ibrahim Essa's *The Televangelist* (2013 prize) – and Amjad Nasser's *Land of No Rain* (commended, 2015 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize).