



الجائزة العالمية للرواية العربية
INTERNATIONAL PRIZE FOR ARABIC FICTION

The International Prize for Arabic Fiction

The Shortlist 2023



Fatima Abdulhamid
*The Highest Part of the
Horizon*



Siddik Hadj-Ahmed
Drought



Zahran Alqasbi
*The Exile of the Water
Diviner*



Najwa Binshatwan
Concerto Qurina Eduardo



Azher Jirjees
The Stone of Happiness



Miral al-Tahawy
*Tales from the Town of
Rising Sun*



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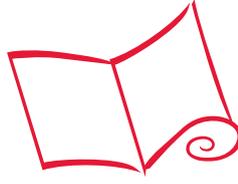
The Shortlist 2023

مركز أبوظبي
لغة العربية
Abu Dhabi Arabic
Language Centre



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INTERNATIONAL PRIZE FOR ARABIC FICTION

About 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, the Department of Culture – Sharjah Government, and the Sharjah Book Authority.

For more information:
www.arabicfiction.org



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

From questions of the past to questions of the future

This year's (2023) shortlisted books present a rich panorama of Arabic narrative art. The works highlight transformations in terms of novelistic content (return to childhood and the magic of places, to foundation myths, and to obscure areas of history and society), and also reflect a diversity of narrative technique and literary style. This diversity reflects the great effort the authors have put into their texts, be it in terms of structure, innovation in drawing characters and unconventional “heroes”, or linguistic inventiveness.

***Drought* by Siddik Hadj-Ahmed**

The novel *Drought* by Siddik Hadj-Ahmed surprises us first with its language, which combines classicism with the particularity of “the language of the periphery” spoken by the settled and nomadic Saharan tribes. The novel then surprises us again as it recalls a forgotten part of our geography and memory: the vast expanse of the Sahara Desert with its harsh environment of drought, famine and war. The focus is on the region of northern Mali and southern Algeria, but the spirit of the novel invokes the broader spiritual and cultural dimension of the tribe that is fighting to survive in a world where climatic and political upheavals impose harsh constraints on nomadic life.

***The Stone of Happiness* by Azher Jirjees**

In *The Stone of Happiness*, Azher Jirjees undertakes a reading of contemporary Iraq through the eyes of a young boy, Toma, who runs away from a brutal father and his village on the banks of a river to take us into the underbelly of Baghdad. In this city, exhausted by war and sectarian conflicts, he lives through all the trials of homelessness, violence and fear. Toma dreamed of photographing the world, but the world has crammed him full of unbearable, horrific images. Chance leads him to a professional photographer who opens up his heart and darkroom to him and gives him a camera to capture what he sees with an eye coming from the depths of the city. Toma, however, soon slips out of his personal story to confront us with the collective life story of a post-war society with its poverty, confusion and armed militias.

***Concerto Qurina Eduardo* by Najwa Binshatwan**

Libyan writer Najwa Binshatwan returns to her favourite stage, that of the transformations of modern Libya, from where she brings the inspiration for her novel *Concerto Qurina Eduardo*. This story of a Libyan family headed by twin sisters takes us through the illusions, contradictions and tragedies of the revolutionary era, to reach the conclusion that a period of such complexity could not result in salvation. As soon as there is a glimmer of hope, the family falls into the clutches of a more savage monster. Against the backdrop of this collective drama are woven human stories seeking a salvation not snatched away by violence and brutality.

***Tales from the Town of Rising Sun* by Miral al-Tahawy**

In Miral al-Tahawy's novel *Tales from the Town of Rising Sun*, intersecting narratives from places of exile and from the original homeland draw us in. Not a stereotypical invocation of the meeting between East and West, the book constructs a different kind of encounter between characters who live the crises of residency and of migration, but with the same misery, illusions, renewed hopes and disappoint-

ments. Rising Sun is a place between the here and the there, between the mire of those who can do nothing and the uplands of those who can do it all; a place where no one starts anything from scratch, where no one arrives without starting to prepare to leave. In that gap, life in this place haunted by troubled souls goes on, lavishing its sweetness and violence on those resident and those passing through.

***The Highest Part of the Horizon* by Fatima Abdulhamid**

In the novel *The Highest Part of the Horizon* by Fatima Abdulhamid we first meet Hamda, the woman who will marry her thirteen-year-old son to a woman eleven years older than him, in an arena controlled by “the snatcher of souls”, a mysterious being who controls destinies and arranges for people to transition from their tangible world to invisible worlds. The author has succeeded in fathoming the human self’s relation to death as an absolute truth, and its relation to love as a relative truth, as expressed by what happened to Suleiman, who lost his wife and his mother and saw his children move far away. In the depths of his despair, from the balcony of his desolate house he sees an apparition who tells him to create another story, since all that we build, with love or otherwise, soon turns to ruins. The most tragic is the ruin of the soul in a world “in which great sorrows push aside minor sorrows”, as the novel states.

***The Exile of the Water Diviner* by Zahran Alqasmi**

Finally, *The Exile of the Water Diviner* by Zahran Alqasmi takes us back to the legend of the spring which appears and vanishes, and the legend of the water diviner, with the thread connecting the possible and the impossible. The son of a woman who drowns in a well is pulled alive from his mother’s womb. This foundational tragedy will turn him into the tribe’s guide in their search for water and life. Through narratives of the village, the family, and confiscated heritage, he represents the fatalism of thirst and its quenching in a village seeking its freedom. The memory and imagination of the villagers are haunted by the sound of water – its roaring arrival and its silent de-

parture – as they wait for a miracle. The existence of the village is connected to the magical powers of the diviner, who, through the magic of writing, becomes the guide for the village in its attempts to create its own legends, without which there will be no fertility, no contentment, and the drowned mother will not give life any more.

In all these novels there is a tendency to seek roots for the common setbacks of our daily lives and our frustrated dreams, but also for our simple aspirations and longing for dignity and freedom. These texts, through their imagination and language, pose questions to us and push us to move on from questions of the past, with all its failures and setbacks, to questions of the future, at a time when the search for individual salvation has taken the place of comprehensive solutions to major issues.

Mohammed Achaari
Chair of Judges, 2023

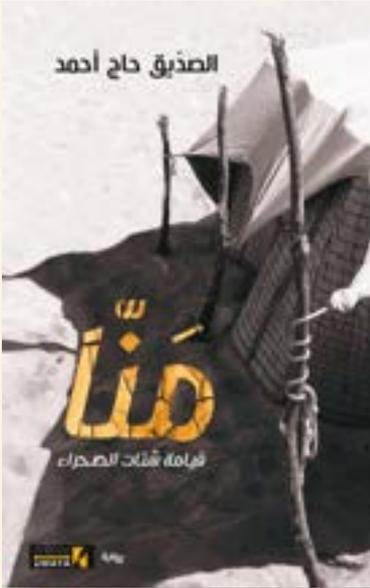
Siddik Hadj-Ahmed



Siddik Hadj-Ahmed is an Algerian writer, born in Adrar, Algeria, in 1967. He works at the Arts College of Adrar University as a lecturer in General Linguistics and Linguistic Discourse, and is a lead researcher in narratives from the Sahara. He won the Ministry of Culture's State Appreciation Prize for his writing connected to the Sahara. He has published three novels: *The Kingdom of Ziwan* (2013), *Comrade* (2016), and *Drought* (2021).

Drought

by Siddik Hadj-Ahmed



Drought tackles a new subject in the Arabic novel: the fate of the Tuareg, who fled their lands after the 1973 drought which hit the Sahara in the north of Mali, and headed towards southern Algeria and Libya, settling in refugee camps there. From 1980, they were used by Gaddafi in wars in Chad and Lebanon in exchange for a promise of an independent Azawan state in northern Mali. Having

endured conflict and imprisonment in camps in Chad, they gave up hope that Gaddafi would fulfil his promise, and began a series of revolts against the regimes in Mali and Niger. The novel's narrator is one of the refugees, who has recorded his story and that of his son on a badly stained manuscript found in a box. It covers the major political and social developments which occurred in the region in the forty years before the fall of Gaddafi in 2011.

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The Lure of the Toyota and the Kalashnikov

With the advent of 1980, all talk became superfluous in the face of the good tidings pouring in, and cries of joys sped skywards. In the settlements of the Saharan people's diaspora in southern Algeria the only name to be heard was Libya. It circulated borne on the tongues of the *famamistes*¹ and their circles just as the glasses of tea circulated with their brilliant halo of foam, which the people always loved as the high point of their gatherings.

The *imzad* and the women's *tindé* began to play a dreamy Tuareg symphony. Hassaniya Arabic poetry did not lag behind either and filled lyrical ballads with a tenderness that rippled through loose-fitting robes, while the unemployed Tuareg youth from Tamanrasset in northern Mali took to strumming their glorious guitars. All as a result of the jubilant news reaching the desert folk: not just work, but military uniforms, the chance to enter Libyan military camps and a promise to establish the rosy homeland in Azawad.

This news increased the desire of those advocating for Azawad – including Badi – for that magical Japanese vehicle, the female gazelle on four wheels: *Lalla Toyota*. May God magnify her praise and multiply her stock and offspring in the oases of Azawad, as the people liked to panegyryze her. They liked to heap praise on her since they found her to be a good companion and helper against the harshness of the desert. So much so, they no longer smiled with pride at their old English girlfriend, the Land Rover.

Without exception the *famamistes* in all the settlements of the Azawad folk in Algeria spread word of this new and abundant Japanese blessing, which the militias of the Green Army had used to combat the rugged terrain of the Sahara, and in Libya as a whole. The people imagined the

1 *Famamiste* is a word of the author's creation, derived from the Arabic *fam* (mouth) and the French ending *-iste*. It might be rendered in English as voice, speaker, or bringer of news.

existence of this vehicle as the descendent of their flocks from back in the golden age before the ill-augured year of evil omen – may God curse it.

The clued-up among the elite of those who wore the *bukar*² and the *litham*³ tempted their people with something else, perhaps even more spellbinding and praiseworthy, related to the majesty of the Kalashnikov and the Simonov that were both plentiful in Libya. They thus had the right to say: Our dream of the Toyota was fulfilled, then our eyes were dazzled by the Kalashnikov!

We had anticipated this moment for years, says Badi, after our folk were humiliated by the Bamako government in the early 1960s. We made our future dream revenge for the martyrs of our revolution in Kidal. We were going to lift our guns high from the back of this noble Japanese lady, atop the Adrar mountains and in the deserts of Tilemsi and Ménaka.

Perhaps we did not really believe what we heard in Ghaddafi's call . . . because of our massive despair and our despondency at the way fate had transpired against us since 1963, along with the consequences of the 1973 drought. The preponderant belief was that the solution to the equation of our lost homeland remained a longing, stuffed away in our hearts and minds despite the succession of disappointments and setbacks. This spurred some of us to rush to Libya without deliberation or consultation.

After the drought struck, the furthest that our ideas, and perhaps our former dreams, went – and this is true – was to recoup our strength and plan our objective: on our Land Rovers with our hunting rifles and swords, we would form an army in the Kidal mountains. Then, by God, along came Mughammar Ghaddafi⁴ to seduce us and give us more than we'd ever imagined.

2 a black cotton turban worn by men

3 a combined turban and mouth-veil, often indigo-blue coloured, also called a tagel-must

4 the Tuareg pronunciation of Muammar Gaddafi's name

Badi's companion to Libya and a great fan of the Japanese model, Sokha el-Ifoghassi, says: we imagined magical Toyotas leaping like gazelles through the wadis of Tilemsi and across the undulating sand dunes of Markouba and the rocky mountains of Kidal. With them we would avenge the tyranny of Modibo Keita and the brutal oppression of his butcher Diby.

Badi adds: light Russian Kalashnikovs and Simonovs, loaded with ammunition, awaited us there. We slung their straps over our shoulders and looked at the shiny copper bullets with pride and superiority.

Hadn't Ghaddafi told them in his famous speech of October 16, 1980, in the city of Awbari in southern Libya: Come . . . come . . . I am one of you . . . You are returning . . . I will grant you the state of Azawad one day?

How could they not respond and rejoice? He offered them an elixir that made the folds of their *bukar* turbans tremble. The attempt to rebel against the Bamako government had been an intractable problem in the past when the tribes sought to impose their separatist state in northern Mali. That followed the independence of the Malian state when it broke away from the federation of the Sudanese Republic (French Sudan) and Senegal.

★ ★ ★

I could have stayed in Algeria and not considered migration to Libya, says Badi. But the truth is spoken and not buried: we did not experience harassment or extremism that harmed us, not from the government of our mother Algeria – may God help us honour her – not from our cousins in the Hoggar Mountains and Tassili and not even from the sheikhs of the Touat oases. In fact, it was the opposite. The adoptive mother offered us sufficient milk to sustain us, cared for us and embraced us. Lying against God is *haram*, forbidden.

Our kind mother Algeria absorbed us. She sent our children to school and educated them. She kept quiet about the origin of our diaspora, knowing full well that we were Malian by birth and upbringing, but in

our roots there were ties to the south of Algeria, at least for most of us, sons of the oases and wadis adjoining the deserts of Tanezrouft, Tin Zaouatine, and Bordj Badji Mokhtar, which were Algerian. Indeed, among us were those whose father or grandfather had been born in the wadis of Timiaouine and Tin Zaouatine, and perhaps when the French drew the border between Algeria and Mali, they went there in search of pasture and then shifted their tents southwards to Boughessa or the wadis of Tessalit, Tchalgha, Talahendak and other areas deemed part of the Malian Bambara.

By the Lord of the Universe, if it hadn't been for the dryness of the ground and the death of the flocks and the accumulation of injustice at the hands of the Bamako government, we would not have come here, even if they had lavished us with gold. Yes, by God. I'll say it again: For the human being of the Sahara, nothing equals the pail of milk with its foam fresh from the udder and the ritual four cups of tea at a gathering in a tent while flocks graze around.

Algeria is an organized country, says Badi. It has a powerful army, scion of its world-revolution liberation army, based on a doctrine, equipped for the ground, and from the air able to observe and frustrate some of our constant, suspicious movements among the dunes and barren mountains of the Sahara. Perhaps its greatest anxiety is our love for four-wheel drive vehicles, and that's a problem!

The border between us stretches for a very long distance, and it's not hidden from the Algerian army – may God protect it – that we are a people expert at making our way at night along invisible paths guided by the stars, slipping between rugged desert mountains. We know the rocks, dunes and water sources that others do not know.

For that reason, from the beginning Algeria created a buffer zone of respect and security between us and her. Perhaps that is forgivable. And when I try to be objective I am not exaggerating if I say that she has every right to worry about her security and economy from the insanity of smuggling – yes, smuggling.

The extremists among we Tuareg – may God forgive them – and, by the way, they are few, buried all that Algerian generosity in the sand

when President Ben Bella – God have mercy on him – became embroiled in handing over some of our leaders from the 1963 Kidal revolution to the government of Modibo Keita, which imprisoned them. They were Zeyd ag Attaher el-Ifoghassi, Ilyas ag Ayyouba el-Daoussahaki, and another whose name escapes me, after they took refuge there and sought its victory.

Whatever the case, it pains me to think of how this very small number of us were ungrateful for the gifts of the great Novemberian state and its unstinting generosity with us in all things. Let me be fair and not exaggerate. I will not speak about the generosity of hosting us on her territory after the 1973 drought since it is not possible to fully describe.

Go into the market of Kidal, Gao or Tessalit, adjacent to her southern border, and you'll see her trademarks on rice, pasta, oil, sugar and tea. Algerian petrol and diesel are sold everywhere on the side of the road in those markets-cum-cities. Is that a small thing? Badi asks his people.

Our mistress Algeria said to us in her coded way: Eat and drink, dwell and enjoy, teach your children. Work is no problem for them if they acquire nationality. As long as they are born on my land and take the nationality, they are Algerian. The same rights and duties in conscription and employment apply to them as to any Algerian. But just don't start smuggling across the border. And my land will not be a base to weave thoughts about your supposed homeland. Apart from that, welcome to you as sons and neighbours.

★ ★ ★

Honestly, the reason I migrated to Libya, adds Badi, was that the situation there was so different. Gaddafi adopted us openly, not in secret. He promised us we would establish our state in Azawad. He enrolled us in the army and opened training camps for us, yes, by God, after we were given papers to settle and build via Mauritanian brothers associated with Libya.

The leader of the Libyan revolution also gave some of us papers as returnees, and the mirage of our promised homeland made our mouths

water, as the joker *Famamiste* Idnani put it at the Bani Walid camp. Following him, at the same session, *Famamiste* Ifoghassi asked whether Algeria would grant us the shade and dreams of the homeland. Idnani replied definitively that it was absolutely out of the question. Then another Tilemsi Arab picked up the conversation and closed the session by complaining about Algeria's grip on the border, given that he and some of his friends among us Tuareg were planning to start smuggling.

We Tamasheq speakers of Adrar, Tilemsi, Ménaka, and Aïr, tended towards the idea of the independent homeland separate from Mali and Niger. It should not, therefore, be ruled out that our rush to meet Mughammar Ghaddafi's call and our agreeing to enlist was certainly a risky deal. But our entering the Bani Walid camp followed by the 2nd March camp on the outskirts of the capital Tripoli was driven by that truly captivating tune.

As for our neighbours among the Arabs of Azawad, most but naturally not all, were afflicted by worldly temptation and rivalry over its spoils. Those who thought that way had – God knows best – to find a quick and short route to silver, as the Arabs say when describing dirhams in their pleasant Hassaniya dialect. And there was no other way, apart from smuggling – or the gun, as some of us named it.

I don't deny that the Azawadian leadership in Libya, which coordinated the idea of the homeland of Azawad with the Libyan Sagheed al-Qashat, included a fair few of our brother Arabs of Azawad, such as the Kounta tribe and the Niger Arabs. As a more visceral example, wasn't the martyr Sidi Haïballa el-Kounti killed by the Malian government in the aftermath of our glorious revolution in Azawad? And that's no small thing. But I'm talking about the mass of people, so as not to make allegations against or blame our Hassaniya-speaking neighbours or disparage their struggle in our glorious revolution, Badi always says.

To put it unequivocally, those who wished to live and were happy with their lot, preferred to stay in Algeria, of course. As for those who aspired to a new tomorrow in Kidal, Gao, Timbuktu, Taoudenni, Ménaka and Agadez and dreamed of the homeland, their heads were sent spinning by Gaddafi's concentrated hallucinogens and they entered those

camps in jubilation without thinking.

Sokha, Badi's companion to Libya, says: Gaddafi had sweet-tasting chocolate and knew our weak spot was a desire to taste its brown slabs on our tongues, so he tossed it to us. For sure, the aroma and the spicing of this delicious recipe were chosen by Gaddafi's mouthpiece Sagheed al-Qashat and a group of Azawadis from our kin who believed in the cause of preparing for our sweet-as-honey homeland.

At that period, the *famamistes* of the Sahel states in Libya spread talk of the auspicious Azawadi Brigade overseeing the Bani Walid and 2nd March camps. It was formed of five battalions, which were divided along Azawadi ethnic and geographical lines.

The first battalion comprised Niger Tuareg; the second Niger Arabs; the third Mali Tuareg; the fourth Mali Arabs; and the fifth, crucially, Mauritians whose mothers were Tuareg Azawadis. The first four battalions were predominantly made up of those who had grown up in the desert and so lacked formal education. As a result, the fifth battalion, by virtue of it being close to all the others and acting to create an ethnic balance between the Tuareg and the Arabs, saw a chance to manage the crisis of the promised homeland. This group also enjoyed greater experience because of the nature of the culture in Nouakchott as well as intelligence from the education they had received and the cultural superiority characteristic of Mauritania in general. These leadership qualities led them to take charge of the issue of Azawad in Gaddafi's Libya.

Those at the forefront of the leading Azawadi battalion were required to speak standard Arabic, French, Hassaniya, Tamasheq, and some African languages like Hausa, Zarma, and Bambara. In that way, some of the Azawadi leadership were able to enter Gaddafi's kitchens and retinue effortlessly as chefs skilled at concocting tasty dishes.

Our Tuareg and Arab Azawadi brigade came together under the banner of those who had come to possess the ethnic and cultural tone of Azawad, as was the case for the leading fifth battalion, says Badi, whose spectrum covered the Tuareg of Ifoghass, Idana, and Imghad, commanders from some of the Malian Arab tribes like the Kunta and some of the Atwaj, and representation of the Niger Air Tuareg, and others, too.

To this dominant leading battalion Gaddafi devoted a special office in the Tuesday Market district of the Libyan capital Tripoli following an inaugural meeting in the nearby city of Khoms in 1980 at which an idea ready for adoption was laid on the table. The Libyan negotiator proposed to the Azawadis (Nigero-Malis) that they form the core of what became known as the *Front populaire de libération du Sahara arabe central*. At the Bani Walid camp there was very great disagreement over and around this Front between Badi's Tuareg comrades and the Libyan commanders.

The revolutionary leader also spent lavishly on this Azawadi political team, putting them up at the luxury Haiti Hotel in Tripoli, where most of the complex issues were studied. They dealt with them in the office during the day, finishing them off by night at this opulent hotel.

The idea was built on the fact of very valuable spoils, at least that's how the Azawadis imagined it in the midst of their eagerness for the separatist homeland. This gift became apparent in Gaddafi's initial encouragement of the Niger Azawadis to rebel and secede from the Niamey government. The Malian separatists, however, soon skilfully snatched the impetus away and imposed themselves on the Libyan stage of events.

The opening of the Bani Walid camp for enlisting Azawadis, situated 160 km south of Tripoli, was the beginning; it was followed by the Badr camp for Azawadi families and children at Mount Nalut and another training camp also close to Tripoli, called 2nd March, according to Badi.

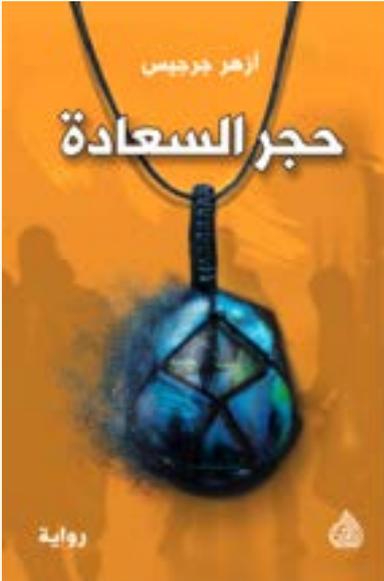
Translated by Raphael Cohen

Azher Jirjees



Azher Jirjees is an Iraqi writer and novelist, born in Baghdad, Iraq in 1973. From 2003 onwards, he worked as a journalist in Iraq and published a number of articles and stories in local and Arab newspapers and periodicals. In 2005, he wrote a satirical book about terrorist militias entitled *Terrorism... Earthly Hell*. As a result of this book, there was an assassination attempt against him and he was forced to flee the country. He went to Syria, then Casablanca and finally to Norway, where he now lives permanently. His published works include two short story collections, *Above the Country of Blackness* (2015) and *The Sweetmaker* (2017). His first novel, *Sleeping in the Cherry Orchard* (2019), was longlisted for the 2020 International Prize for Arabic Fiction and is forthcoming in English translation by Banipal Books. *The Stone of Happiness* (2022) is his second novel. He works as a literary editor and translator between Arabic and Norwegian.

The Stone of Happiness



The events of *The Stone of Happiness* take place in Mosul and Baghdad between 1962 and 2018. After his younger brother drowns in the river Tigris in Mosul, young Kamal Toma runs away, terrified of his father's brutal reaction, and hides in a fearsome place known as the "garden of the spirits". Just before boarding a lorry heading south to the capital city, he picks up a small stone. Upon arrival in Baghdad, he searches for a place of

refuge and finds himself in Khan al-Rahma, where he grows up in an atmosphere blighted by poverty and fear. Yet he finds comfort and strength to carry on pursuing his dreams from the strange stone. Kamal meets a photographer who helps him fulfil his personal and professional destiny, becoming an itinerant photographer himself, roaming through alleyways and markets and recording the life of the city and its people. As the years pass and the country goes through hard times, armed militias occupy the district where Kamal lives, and his life is turned upside down. Fear begins to ravage the inner peace he has always striven to preserve.

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The Guardian of the Garden

I was eight years old when I found the way into the garden of the djinn. It happened in the summer of 1962 after I did something stupid in the market that sells herbs, spice and dried fruit, where there are long lines of shops on both sides of the street and a strong smell of curry, bay and incense. My stepmother used to sell the shopkeepers there brooms made of straw and bath scrubbers made of woollen yarn. With the money she made, she bought sugar, salt and cooking oil. In fact she played a rather limited role in this process: it was my elder sister Janet who made the brooms and the scrubbers, and I was the one who carried the goods back and forth.

I used to follow my stepmother around like a dog in the hope she would buy me a *zalabia*, a fritter coated in sugary syrup. I must have looked pathetic, drooling at the sight of the sweet golden spirals neatly stacked on the counter in the sweet shop.

I never saw anyone congenial in that market. They secretly despised me and treated me with utter contempt, like a pebble stuck in the heel of a shoe. Not only that: some of them would even ask my stepmother about my younger brother in my presence, without any concern for my feelings.

“How’s Raymond?” one would ask.

Or “Why don’t you bring Raymond with you to market?”

Or “Oh my, they say Raymond’s blond!”

“He isn’t blond, you fat shopkeeper. He has straw-coloured hair and his teeth stick out like a rabbit’s. And you’re all creeps,” I’d say to myself. In the meantime my stepmother, worried about the evil eye, would tell them that Raymond was sick and hadn’t been sleeping well at night. But she wouldn’t forget to buy him some sweets. She bought them only for him, while stuffing some cheap chewing gum in my mouth and saying, cunning as a devil: “Finish what you have in your mouth first, and then I’ll buy you what you want.”

But what I wanted wasn’t so hard to obtain: just one of those fritters.

What made me really angry was that this woman was so hard to

trick. In fact tricking her was one of the most impossible things in the world. Whenever I tried to outwit her by swallowing my gum and telling her it was finished, she'd pretend to commiserate. "Ah, dear. But now we're out of money," she would say.

Then she'd give me a false promise: "I'll buy you some *zalabia* next time."

The day would pass tediously whenever I had to watch my brother sucking away on his lollipop. I would be waiting for him to drop it, and then for the ants to eat it.

I liked my brother, but they were so cruel to me I preferred the ants to him.

Once I saw her buying him some pink cubes of Turkish delight coated in cornflour and hiding them in a bag. I pulled at her dress to remind her I was there.

"Auntie, Auntie, and me?" I said.

She looked down and told the same old lie: "We've run out of money. Don't be sad. I swear by Jesus I'll buy you some fritters next Friday."

Friday came and she didn't buy any. Then the next Friday came and the same again. And so on till I'd had my fill of it and I did something stupid that would later lead me to the garden of the djinn.

On that fateful scorching summer's day, my stepmother had sold all her brooms and scrubbers and stopped to have a chat on the side with the man who sold sweets. They were so engrossed in their conversation that they no longer seemed aware of my presence. All I had to do was climb up on the bench, put out my hand and make a grab. Right in front of them I snatched a fritter and hid it in my trouser pocket, apparently without them noticing. As soon as the conversation was over and she had bought what she needed in the market, she gave me the bags to carry and I followed her home, too frightened even to turn around to see if I was being followed.

On the way I had a feeling that with the heat the fritter had started to melt in my pocket and was sticking to the lining, so I slowed down in the hope of an opportunity to take it out and check it was in good

condition. But my stepmother noticed my unusual behaviour and turned around to tell me off. “Get a move on, stupid,” she said.

“Okay, Auntie,” I replied.

We finally reached home. I threw the bags down in the kitchen and ran up the stairs to the flat roof, pretending I was going to check up on the pigeons and give them some water. I hid in the pigeon loft and took out the fritter. It was in a bad way. Threads, hairs and bits of dust that had settled in my pocket from God knows where had stuck to the sugary coating. But this didn’t stop me wanting to eat it. I ate it in two bites and rubbed my stomach as rich people do after a hearty meal.

But because I have such bad luck, I was found out. I don’t know how it happened, but this came to light over lunch at home. My stepmother was sitting grumpily with her mouth twisted at the corner to send the message that she didn’t want to eat.

“What’s wrong? Why aren’t you eating?” asked my father.

“I don’t have any appetite. I’m just too upset,” my stepmother replied.

“Upset? Upset about what?”

“Nothing. Don’t worry about me right now. Eat up your food. I don’t want to spoil your meal.”

My father bit into an onion and followed that up with a piece of bread.

“Say what’s on your mind, woman. Upset about what?”

Mawkishly she bowed her head and sighed. “Upset about your son. Your son’s a thief, Toma.”

Oh, how cruel that short sentence was!

My father stopped chewing, reached out with his large hand and gave me a slap that still rings in my ears. Then, unaware of the reasons why I had stolen the fritter from the man in the market, he grabbed me by the nape of my neck and dragged me like a prisoner into the courtyard. He tied me to the trunk of the eucalyptus tree and started to flog me with a cane. The thin cane stung horribly, almost as bad as the signs of satisfied vengeance in the eyes of that woman, who de-

served an Olympic gold medal for cunning and deceit.

In the end he untied me and threw me into the street shouting: “Damn you and damn your mother, you depraved, shameless thief.”

I still don’t know why my father called me depraved, given that I was too young at the time to engage in any depravity. Nor do I know why he was always so angry with me, given that his colleagues spoke of him as a friendly guy who was always willing to share hours of fun and joy with them.

What use are fathers if they’re cheerful only when they’re out of the house?

My father was one of those men who take off their good-mood coats at the front door and immediately turn hostile, miserable and angry. At his first step inside the house, from the moment he first cleared his throat, he would be in a foul mood, scowling, glowering and breathing heavily. But then during the day he didn’t stay with us for more than two hours. He didn’t have any work to do, and in the morning he went to the café, came back at noon for lunch, and then took a quick siesta in bed. This was when he was especially angry and grouchy. That short period would end with him slamming the door and going back to the cafés where unemployed men gathered. Then he would spend the evening in some secret bar in the backstreets of the city, its door guarded by a fat, bad-tempered dog that knew its customers as well as it knew its own offspring.

Once I went out into the street barefoot and followed him. I saw with my own eyes how men slunk like thieves towards this bar and how the dog jumped up to greet them one by one. But I didn’t dare go any closer till one day I had to. On that day Janet had a raging fever and seemed to be at death’s door, and I was sent to tell him. I well remember how the damned dog barked at me and how one of the drunks coming out told it off. If that man hadn’t turned up, I wouldn’t have gone in.

The place took me completely by surprise. It had stone walls painted red and a low ceiling with yellow lamps hanging down over old wooden tables with worn edges. Men were gathered around the

tables, some of them gambling, others just drinking arak and snacking on strips of cucumber. The sound of glasses clinking and the loud music from the gramophone in the corner combined to ensure a night free from boredom. At the far end there was a high table laid with bottles of wine and glasses as slim as the bodies of dancing girls. Behind it sat a clean-shaven man with a ruddy face and dancing eyes. He was a strange-looking man, sprightly and with one ear smaller than the other. His eyebrows wagging, he said: "Come on up, whippersnapper."

When I shied away he smiled and continued: "I'm not going to bite you. Tell me what you want."

"I'm looking for my father."

"And who would your father be? Tell me quick."

"Toma," I said.

"Ah, so you're Kamal, then?"

"Yes."

He turned his small head right and left and muttered: "Toma . . . Toma . . . Toma."

We wagged his eyebrows again and pointed with his hand. "There, at the table in the corner," he said.

I hurried over to the table, which was buried under a cloud of smoke. I found my father sitting with three of his friends, smoking cigarettes and drinking arak, a pack of cards on the table in front of them. He was about to finish off a glass of arak and it was obvious that, as usual, he had lost and had sat down to forget the world by drinking arak. I went up to him and whispered "Papa, papa" in his ear.

"Damn, what do you want?"

"Janet's sick."

He showed no trace of any paternal feeling.

"Papa, you have to come with me. Janet's sick," I continued, raising my voice this time.

He knocked back the rest of his drink, raised his head lethargically and pointed towards the door. "Go, and I'll follow," he said.

But he didn't follow me. I swear he didn't. He came home after midnight, lurching from side to side and wheezing intermittently. He

stood in the courtyard and belched five thousand times before finding his way to bed, where he fell asleep snoring loudly. When he woke up in the morning, he cursed Janet for being ill.

It hurts me to say that my father was a regular customer in the bar. He went there every night to drink, gamble and joke with his drinking mates, and the outcome was perpetual poverty and a household that was hell.

That day in the courtyard he didn't just beat me. If he'd done that, I would have let it pass without tears. He also spat on the memory of my mother, and so I sat crying on the front stoop. The sun was scorching hot and there was no shade in the street. Going inside was impossible so long as the man with the cane was within those walls. Then I remembered the streets nearby were covered with arches that were like tunnels: I could take shelter there in the shade until the sun sank in the sky. Maybe the people had built those streets with arches specifically to provide shade from the hot Iraqi sun. But my idea didn't work out because some rough boys were playing marbles there and they might bash in the head of anyone who went too close. In the meantime I saw a thin boy holding a bird trap walk timidly close to the wall, then go under the arches very cautiously so as not to disturb their game. I knew the boy well. He was a boy whose father had died and he lived in the street behind us, in a house that was more like a ruin, with his mother and his blind grandmother. I followed him along the same street until we left our neighbourhood and walked on towards the garden of the djinn.

The distance between the Mayasa district where we lived and the garden of the djinn was about six hundred yards, but none of us dared go there for fear of being burned alive, or at the very least losing our minds. The old people in the neighbourhood told stories about how the djinn had once taken possession of a small group of children when they went into the garden. Three other children who went inside had been burned to cinders, they said. It was rare to find a child who dared approach it.

In the distant past it hadn't been like that. In those days it was just

an abandoned garden, with no heirs to claim it. It had shrivelled mulberry trees here and there, people walked past it without fear or suspicion and there was no fatwa saying they should avoid it. But something happened that made it forbidden territory and gave it the name by which it's now known. That was when a farmer buried a baby girl alive under one of the mulberry trees because of rumours that the baby wasn't really his daughter. People said she was the result of an adulterous relationship between the farmer's wife and a groom who worked in the stables of a rich livestock merchant. When the affair came to light, the couple fled and the husband was furious at the affront to his honour. But a short time after the burial, people started hearing noises like a baby crying coming from the garden at night. Because this was an unprecedented experience for the people of Mosul, they interpreted it in different ways. The city divided into two camps: one camp claimed that the orchard was cursed because the illegitimate baby had defiled the soil, while others said it was a sign from God that the baby girl was legitimate and her fugitive mother was innocent. The dispute between the two sides continued, with abuse and insults flying back and forth, as is usual with trivial disagreements. In the end the imam of the Khatoun mosque managed to nip in the bud a dispute that everyone predicted would lead to brutal conflict. He gathered people together, climbed up into his pulpit and gave them his ruling. "It's nothing to do with the burial of the baby, you ignorant people," he said. "It's because of the djinn. A tribe of blue djinn has taken advantage of your lack of attention and the fact that you are busy with your vices and your lusts, and have moved into the garden. They're the ones making the noises you hear in the middle of the night. The only solution is for you to work together to deal with the imminent danger that is threatening the city." At the end of his sensational speech, the imam told them to get their shovels and join him in sealing off the garden with a wall made of mud and stones. As soon as the first course of stones was laid, the imam inserted some amulets in the mortar underneath and issued a fatwa that, in order to save lives and keep the country safe, no one should enter the garden.

I watched the thin boy sneak into the garden through a secret opening made by foxes and dogs. I was afraid, but the fact that he, an insignificant boy like me, dared do it helped me overcome my fear a little and I slipped in behind him. I was surprised to find that the garden was spacious and green, with mulberry, pistachio and olive trees, cut in half by a stream where ducks were swimming, with ants and ladybirds on its banks. Sparrows had nested in the branches and crows were hopping here and there peacefully, feeding on fruit that had fallen unpicked. The grass was lush and glossy and in the middle was a large spreading mulberry tree beyond a hillock around which daffodils grew.

He looked back at me and smiled.

“Come on, don’t be frightened,” he said, beckoning me.

I followed him to the stream and asked in a whisper: “Aren’t there any djinn?”

“Djinn, my foot. Those grown-ups are liars,” he replied.

Translated by Jonathan Wright

Najwa Binshatwan



Najwa Binshatwan is a Libyan academic and novelist, born in Ajdabiya, Libya, in 1970. She was the first Libyan author to be shortlisted, in 2017, for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, for her novel *The Slave Yards* (2016). She has written three other novels: *The Horses' Hair* (2007), *Orange Content* (2008) and *Concerto Qurina Eduardo* (2022). She was chosen as one of the 39 best Arab authors under the age of 40 by the Beirut39 project (2009–2010) organized by the Hay Festival, and her story 'The Pool and the Piano' was included in the Beirut39 anthology. In 2018, Binshatwan won a Banipal fellowship for creative writing. In 2019, her short story collection *Serendipity* (2019) was longlisted for the Al-Multaqa Short Story Prize, and her collection *Catalogue of a Private Life* (2018) won the English Pen Translates Award.

Concerto Qurina Eduardo



A coming-of-age novel about a young girl in Libya, her extended family, and how their lives are affected by politics and war, in a narrative rich in characters and perspectives. She belongs to a family with Greek origins, an ethnic minority who have their own distinctive culture in multi-ethnic Libyan society. Through her eyes, we view the changes which occurred in Libya from the 1970s until the

revolution which overthrew Gaddafi in 2011 and the civil war in 2014. The novel describes her father's killing during a period known as the 'cultural revolution' in Libya, the nationalization of the family's factory, and the impact of this huge economic change upon them. Binshatwan weaves together complex themes including the experience of Libyan Jews, and their emigration or expulsion in the 1960s; the civil war and its effects on the social fabric of society; the smuggling of ancient artefacts and mistreatment of Libyan cultural heritage; and the cultural and ethnic exchanges between Mediterranean peoples.

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My mother once mixed us up in the bath and from that time on decided to paint my nails violet and my sister's red in order to be able to tell us apart more easily.

Later, she told us apart by how we moved our hands, after noticing that I put out my right hand to get things while my twin Lamyā used her left hand. That was before we reached the age of starting to speak, when another difference became apparent. I started to speak at the age of around two, while my sister didn't say a word!

There was no reason for this except that she was slow to talk. Some children are slow and there was no reason to worry, so the doctors said. But worry was second nature in our family. Time after time, my grandmother took my sister to the doctors. Once she got a prescription from a woman in the waiting room. She told my grandfather about it and he went to the butcher and bought seven lambs' tongues, as the prescription specified, in the hope of loosening her tongue.

My grandmother cooked the seven tongues and fed them to Lamyā, having first made sure she would be hungry so she would eat as many as possible. She had two helpings, and it was said that I joined her the second time. My grandfather wondered whether, if I ate from the prescription, it would make my tongue grow longer, and my grandmother laughed, justifying my eating: "This is a country where a man needs two tongues to be able to claim his rights. So let her eat!"

I don't know what it was that loosened my sister's tongue after that so that she spoke. Was it the seven lambs' tongues or just the time the doctors advised?

So Lamyā spoke, though she did have a stutter.

The family tried to cure her by any means possible of the disability that was hindering her progress in speaking, especially before she was old enough for school. But she continued to suffer from her speech impediment, which went with her to school. There she began to suffer from fear and embarrassment, which I could not leave her to face on her own. I supported my sister to the extent that I learned to stutter like her, to eliminate any difference between us

and stop her being singled out so that she shouldn't have that hateful description of 'stutterer' attached to her.

My mother argued against me for fear that stuttering would become my normal way of speaking, but I perfected it like someone perfecting a second language. It became difficult to distinguish us from one another either in appearance or in speech.

In fact, we played with the family, exchanged nail varnish, and enjoyed our little secret.

Red for me, and violet for her.

We left nothing to distinguish between us, until the only thing left to divide us would be the life or death of one of us.

The Libya Train

The first time I got to know Amal, Uncle Mas'ud's daughter, takes me back such a long way that I can remember nothing before it.

I remember that it was in Al-Fuwaytat, in the morning, that the house was smelling of food and our elder sister Amina was helping my mother in the kitchen, and the family was gathering together for lunch.

I was playing with my twin in the large open area in front of the villas when a girl appeared, wearing jeans and a white blouse. She was tall and pretty, with hair falling over her shoulders, and as soon as she saw us she smiled at us. When we ran away, she called us by our names and offered us sweets and presents so we wouldn't run any further. So we lay down behind a lemon tree, trying to make up our minds: should we go back, or stick by our decision to hide from the strange girl?

Was she one of the local jinn who filled the empty spaces here, as my brother Ayyub said? Did jinn wear modern clothes, like those the girl was wearing, and speak like her, bring sweets and presents from Germany, and know our names?

“I think she’s Amal, Uncle Mas’ud’s daughter,” said Lamya.

I put my hand over my mouth and mumbled: “Aah!”

I hadn’t imagined we had such a beautiful cousin.

That was the first time I had seen or been aware of Amal since she left Benghazi when I was very young. She and the family were away for a long time. We heard that this was because of a tragic car accident my uncle’s family had been involved in, in which my uncle’s wife, Carla, had died, and as a result of which Amal had undergone a long period of treatment in Berlin.

Lamya and I never met Carla. She came into the world and left it, and we had seen her only in pictures. But I loved the thing she had left us, which was like her – Amal, her daughter and the daughter of Uncle Mas’ud, with her beauty, her gentleness, and her difference.

Her presence filled the empty space for us. Our times with her were happy and delightful. She and Uncle Mas’ud spent most of their time in our house, and when she returned to their villa to sleep and rest, she would take me and my twin sister with her. When she was young, she would let us in to her room and give us her toys. The most important thing was that she let us play with her clothes cupboard, put on clothes and high boots, wrap ourselves in shawls and lose ourselves in plays and fashion shows, oblivious to the world around us.

She would let us do whatever we liked. She gave me the electric train, which I loved and travelled all over the world on, when she saw that I was playing with it for a long time.

Amal always encouraged me to talk when she discovered the difficulties I was experiencing. She played some language games with me to make me speak. I did it, perhaps because I loved her and wanted her to carry on taking me with her to the places she was visiting, inside and outside of Benghazi. I also wanted her to keep talking to me as if I were her younger sister. She didn’t just demand that I talked, like the others did, but talked to me as a friend.

Then I got older, and we started to talk quickly on the phone whenever my mother and grandfather called them. My conversation during the minutes allowed me could be summarised as: when are you com-

ing back to Benghazi?

Amina and Amal, as two friends, would sit together on the veranda of my uncle's house. We would hear them talking about fashion, clothes, love, cooking, films and songs, swapping coded jokes, as well as tapes and books and magazines. My twin and I would play the part of a postman between them, taking from one and giving to the other. But before taking from either of them, we would disappear behind the villas to look for things. We found makeup, perfumes, shirts, underwear, and foreign magazines in which men and woman exchanged kisses; that meant, we discovered kisses, and this was the most dangerous discovery, for it disturbed us, made us feel embarrassed, and made us hide the magazines under our clothes so that no one would see them. The people we saw in the magazines between Amina and Amal were the first we had seen of a world that was hidden from view, and about which we knew nothing apart from guesswork. "Isn't that shameful?" I asked Lamya. "Yes, but there's nothing shameful about a secret."

"Shouldn't we tell Mother?" I asked her.

She thought not: "If we tell her, we won't see anything new."

We agreed to keep quiet, and to see more.

But Amina discovered what we were up to and interrogated us hard in her room. We tried to deny it; then Lamya found the courage to threaten to tell our mother and Ayyub about it if she punished us. Amina calmed down, opened a drawer and gave us some chewing gum, and said she had forgiven us. But we only left her room after Lamya agreed with her that we could continue our postman service in exchange for keeping quiet.

Amina submitted to our pilfering for some days but then started never leaving Amal's side.

The world to be found among the magazines and cassette tapes was a beautiful world that had no equivalent in the real world, a world that we could only see hidden in the bags that we carried back and forth and stuck our noses into. Whenever anyone asked what we were carrying, we would say: "Books or food."

We realised that our share of this would inevitably come when we grew up and became an object of attention for the schoolboys and street boys, as happened to Amina when we walked with her from Julyana to the city centre.

One day we were taking Amal some food when we saw a young man in front of Uncle Mas'ud's villa. He was standing beside a red Jaguar car, talking to Amal. We hadn't seen him before. He was so smart and handsome we thought he must have come out of an Italian magazine. It was as if the whole scene, not just the young man, had come straight out of a magazine, for Amal was also stunningly beautiful, and any man who saw her would fall into her trap.

We froze where we were, like a tree trunk, and they didn't notice us. We watched the scene develop as they do in magazines, slowly from page one to page seven, and it would have been like that, had it not been for the sudden appearance of Uncle Mas'ud, who crushed it and returned it to reality. At once, the red convertible moved away, the young man waving from it to my uncle and his daughter before it disappeared among the trees.

He was Amal's fiancé, Amina told us later, in answer to our question. Ayyub was cross that Amal's fiancé had been at my uncle's house. He even threatened to beat him and smash his car if he saw him again in front of the villas. My mother intervened and stopped him coming out with anything that would annoy my uncle and his daughter, but he took no notice and increased his surveillance of Amal and the car's owner.

He was angry, swearing and ranting.

The handsome young man with the thick hair hanging down to his shoulders, the shirts that clung to his lean body, and the Sharon Stone trousers, continued to come to Mas'ud's house, whether my uncle was there or not. I was once there at my uncle's house, playing with the train in the hall, when I saw Faisal (that was his name) putting his hand inside Amal's blouse, hugging and kissing her. The train finished its circuit without me. It was something that snatched me from my childhood and made me wonder: "Why do grown-ups do these lovely

things and tell us that they are 'shameful'? Why do they do shameful things knowing they are shameful? And why do children come from these acts and the family are happy when they appear?" When I told Lamyia what I had seen she told me it was only shameful because we were children and it would be different as soon as we grew up. She also said that we must eat in order to grow quickly. I believed everything she said about food and love.

I often went about with Amal and her fiancé. It was as though the family had made a condition that one of us should be with them. Even if the witness was young and stuttered and didn't give their interrogators what they were keen to get hold of.

Faisal picked us up in his Jaguar convertible several times and drove us through the city towards the sea. His hand was in Amal's. He laughed a lot and sang all the foreign songs along with the tape recorder. They loved the centre of the city and the corniche and preferred to sit on the promenade by the sea on the deserted outskirts of Julyana, exchanging passionate whispers, while I played with my toys not far from them. Before the excursion ended, he would buy us a delicious Greek ice cream and slip something into Amal's hand.

I saw a lot of what was forbidden to two people who were engaged. The young man only left when he was loaded up with enough kisses from Amal to last a week, and she was the same.

My cousin advised me to say nothing, and I kept to that so that my excursions with them could continue, wherever she went.

I loved the places I visited and would visit with no need for the electric train, and I dreamed of the ice cream that I would get, so long as I didn't say a word. And why not? It wouldn't cost me anything, for I had difficulties speaking and saying anything anyway.

I arrived at Uncle Mas'ud's villa one day, carrying my comb and towel. It was my mother's habit to send my sister and me to Amal, for her to comb our hair. I found Amal sitting in the hall with moist eyes and a red nose. She was on her own, crying.

I couldn't speak. I went up to her and put my hand on her shoulder, but she carried on crying until she made me cry with her. Then she

noticed me and gave me a hug. “Don’t be afraid. Nothing’s happened,” she said, then wiped her face and mine.

I stammered for a long time as I tried to ask her what the matter was, but I don’t think I uttered a single useful sentence.

She informed me of her own accord that without any warning her fiancé had disappeared. It was said that his family had smuggled him to Egypt after security had raided their house.

I didn’t understand why the security services had done that, or what the young man had done for security to want to take him.

I didn’t understand why Faisal had suddenly disappeared from Amal’s and my life, or why Amal could no longer find him around or find happiness. He didn’t answer the phone, he didn’t come to say goodbye to her, she couldn’t find him in the sailors’ club or the resort. No one saw him in the cafés downtown. She looked for him here and there and sometimes cried because he had disappeared without telling her, or perhaps because she missed him and was pining for him.

A few days after the owner of the Jaguar had disappeared, the door of Uncle Mas’ud’s villa was closed on Amal’s tears and agitation, and my uncle and his daughter travelled back to far-away Germany. There was no more ice cream, no more love slipping out from Italian magazines smuggled into Libya. The magazines stopped, and the secret of Faisal’s disappearance remained unknown. Uncle Mas’ud’s villa was peopled by ghosts whose stories were told by Ayyub, but my cousin’s love stayed in my heart and mind from that time on. Time has not changed my feelings for her since we first met.

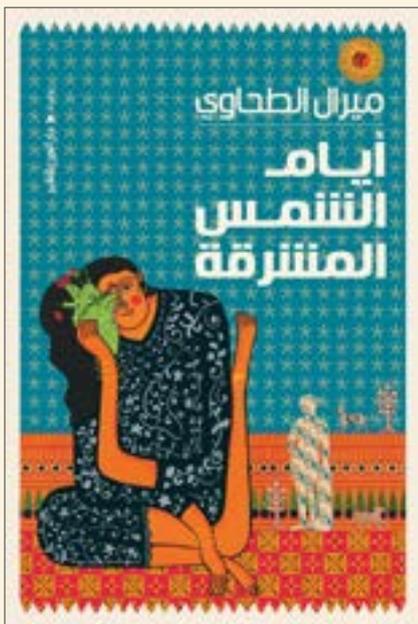
Translated by Paul Starkey

Miral al-Tahawy



Miral al-Tahawy is an Egyptian writer, novelist and academic, born in Ash Sharqia Governorate, Egypt, in 1968. She currently works as professor of Arabic literature at the College of World Languages and Translation, the University of Arizona. Her most well-known works include *The Tent* (1995), *The Blue Aubergine* (1998), winner of the 2002 State Incentive Prize for the Novel in Egypt, *The Strumming of the Gazelles* (2002), and *Brooklyn Heights* (2010) which was shortlisted for the 2011 International Prize for Arabic Fiction and won the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature, awarded by the American University in Cairo. Her novels have been translated into more than twenty languages worldwide. She has also published a volume of short stories and academic studies, and has taught at universities in Virginia, North Carolina and the College of Sciences in Al-Fayoum University.

Tales from the Town of Rising Sun



The events of *Tales from the Town of Rising Sun* are sandwiched between the suicide of Jamal, a young man torn between different identities, in the opening pages, and the suicide of Mimi, an African girl, who has survived a massacre in her country, at the end of the novel. They take place in an imagined small town called Rising Sun on the southwestern border of America, where the illegal smuggling of

workers and immigrants is a daily occurrence. The novel sheds light on a group marginalized in Western society who are – incorrectly – regarded as the survivors, and gives them a voice, delving deep into their concerns. Whilst it is a classic example of a narrative conveying the disorientation of exile, above all else it platforms the foreigner's perspective; simultaneously rebelling against this new reality and finding a way to adapt to its harshness.

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Ni'am Khabbaz trudged laboriously down the familiar streets of her town, Rising Sun, her steps heavy and cautious. Her heart was pounding. However, she couldn't see any clear reason for this so she continued on her way. Then, suddenly, she stopped in her tracks. There were police cars in front of her house as well as some ambulances, surrounded by members of a medical crew who stood waiting for her. When she caught sight of some neighbours casting awkward glances in her direction, she realized that some catastrophe had taken place, though she couldn't tell how serious it was or grasp its implications. So many catastrophes happened around her, she couldn't keep track, still less fathom the losses they'd inflicted.

When she walked into the house, she found her eldest son, who was just past his nineteenth birthday, sprawled on the floor face down. A bullet had penetrated his skull and come out of the back of his head to lodge in the wall; his hulky frame lay in a pool of fresh blood.

She thought back to the commotion that had been raised a few months earlier in front of her neighbour Suzanna's house after Suzanna's daughter Yolanda died from bullet wounds inflicted by her boyfriend, who took his own life as well. The ambulance carrying the bodies had flashed by so quickly, people hadn't had time to think about how Yolanda, the pretty eighteen-year-old, had died. They'd known her since she was a little girl playing with the boys around the town's scattered wooden shacks. They had watched her body blossom into fullness like a goddess of grace out of Greek mythology, only to witness her tragic exit from life itself.

People watched Suzanna weep bitter tears over the loss of her eldest daughter, only to go back to cleaning houses, opening her heart to the men who courted her affections while consoling her in the tragedy that had befallen her. After her pretty girl died, Suzanna stayed in the same house. She simply wiped the blood stains off the windows and then opened them again as though they had never witnessed anything of note.

Not long before this, the town had witnessed the murder of Oscar, who had been fiddling with the ATM machine next to the gas station

that was across from a spot where day labourers would crowd onto the sidewalk every morning in hopes of lining up a job for the day. It was around eleven o'clock at night, and everything seemed calm in the town, when a bullet came from somewhere and lodged in his head. By the time everybody came out to see what would happen next, the young man's body lay prone in front of the ATM, his red jacket drenched in untold amounts of blood.

They couldn't tell whether the shot had come from the police car that had been seen speeding away from the scene, or from some other direction. It wasn't important to know the details, anyway, since people in those parts were being killed by stray bullets all the time. Since these incidents often happened inside the town's ramshackle wooden houses, it was thought likely to be a case of suicide or a family dispute of the sort rife in Rising Sun, whose consequences people were quick to forget as they preoccupied themselves with some other happening.

Shootings were constantly erupting in the most unexpected places. A few months earlier, an elementary school had witnessed a scuffle accompanied by gunfire in the principal's office during a meeting of the parents' council. Warning sirens went off, and students got down on their bellies under tables and desks in anticipation of orders to evacuate. There had been an altercation between the principal and a construction worker, who might have been from an island in the Caribbean and who spoke a dialect nobody could make out. He had already been furious, but his fury was exacerbated when he realized that the people around him really couldn't understand him. In a fit of wild rage, he thrust his gun in the principal's face, repeating like a madman before and after every other sentence, "Do you understand me? . . . You don't understand me!" The principal was so terrified he peed in his pants several times, assuring his assailant sincerely: "Yes, I do understand you. I'm trying, sir!"

After these random incidents, shootings in the valley turned into a kind of serial tragedy, or a seasonal phenomenon, like forest fires. Nobody knew where they started, or where they would end. The most recent of these had occurred one morning at Mountain Lake Second-

ary School, when a student decided to shower the walls of the school with a steady stream of bullets. In the process, the student had injured himself and killed a number of others who had been passing by. After this, the school closed for several weeks. However, it reopened again when it became apparent to everyone that shootings had become a part of life in that region, a way of expressing anger and malaise. It was an anger that would erupt unexpectedly, manifesting itself in the form of a tragedy that couldn't be easily erased.

Ni'am Khabbaz had once thought shootings were something that only happened to other people, like Yolanda, Oscar and Suzanna, and that they would never touch her own household. But then they did. One fall evening, a muffled shot was fired, and she saw the body of her first-born, Jamal, reduced to a pool of blood. This was followed by the usual rigmarole. The policeman wrote a tersely worded report on the incident that read: "A bullet shot through the mouth passed through the skull and lodged in the wall. The victim was wearing black running shorts and no shirt. His mouth smells of marijuana, and he's holding a red Nokia telephone in his hand. The causes and motives of the suicide are under investigation."

While the autopsy was being performed, Ni'am Khabbaz was called on repeatedly by friends of Ahmed al-Wakil, who ran a place known as The Islamic Mortuary. The imam, Abu Abd al-Qadir, spoke about the deceased, the ritual washing of the body, the funeral prayer, the burial procedures, and the location of the cemetery. She also received visits from her friends Fatima, Suzanna, and Crystal, sombre and swathed in black and white. Against a background of chanted Qur'an and prayers for God's tranquility to be sent down, they talked to her about patience in the midst of suffering. Colourful prayer mats lay scattered here and there, and the house was redolent with the fragrance of incense and oriental spices, as well as some flowers that had been placed on the floor on the spot where the body had lain before being laid to rest in the nearby graveyard, which they referred to as "the garden of spirits".

When night fell, everyone left, and Ni'am Khabbaz closed the door of her house. However, the fragrance of death remained. In fact, it

haunted her for months, and even the most powerful cleaning agents couldn't get rid of it. In hopes of dispelling some of the odours that lingered in her memory, the neighbours helped her replace her old rug with a cactus-green carpet. However, the new carpet's neutral colour just made the place more depressing, while the blood that had been spilled and the bullet that had struck the wall continued to hang oppressively over the scene. As time passed, Ni'am Khabbaz became preoccupied with her own sufferings, while Rising Sun preoccupied itself with other incidents, such as the drowning of Mimi Dong, the loss of Emmy's cat Lucy, the flight of Ni'am Khabbaz's other son Umar, the wounds suffered by Salim al-Najjar, and the attempt to extricate the children trapped on a disaster-stricken boat called, 'Ayn al-Hayah (The Eye of Life).

Rising Sun lay at the foot of crimson mountain ranges along the country's west coast, humbly ensconced between crossroads that led to the mountain resorts in the north. If seen from the air, it looked like nothing but a low-lying area surrounded by rocky terrain and arid plateaus whose southern edges met a forbidding desert that had served historically as a border crossing for infiltrators. From the east, it overlooked a series of basalt rock formations marked by undulating shades of grey, and whose shadows danced like ghostly heads over the hills. To the west, the coast was dominated by an enormous rocky cliff that had become a favourite destination for amateur climbers, but which interfered with Rising Sun's contact with the ocean. All that connected the settlement to the western coast was a watery inlet that people had come to refer to as "the bay", and which widened and made its way alongside the stony precipice.

As a result of these unique geographical features, the residents of Rising Sun had grown accustomed to breathing in a daily dose of the dust that wafted in from the surrounding hills. They had also resigned themselves to the fumes exuded by the shallow bay, which were laden with the stench of male sea lions that had not survived the fierce battles accompanying mating season, followed by the odours given off by the

females as they gave birth to their young in the pockets of warm water.

The summer winds would blow into the town, pelting windows with the dirt they had carried in from the mountain. Then the rain would fall, its soiled torrents streaming down like caustic tears that etched their tracks into the layers of cracked paint. In this way, the seasonal rains would denude the wood from which these lowly dwellings had been constructed. In so doing, they whetted the appetites of white ants and red scorpions, which would come dancing out from between cracks in the ground, crawl up onto the slates and clay tiles on the roofs, and make their way down from their hiding places into the flowerpots hanging on the balconies.

Rising Sun was little more than a small settlement, or the ruins of an abandoned semi-coastal border town. It was said to have started as a collection of shacks that housed labourers in now-defunct copper mines. The workers had long ago departed, leaving behind a number of ramshackle huts that lay scattered across the rugged space. Then over time, the settlement had expanded, absorbing nearby neighbourhoods and residential areas across the desert plateaus until it became a way station for labourers attempting to reach the mountain farms in the north.

Buses carrying sanitation workers and landscapers would emerge from the settlement every morning and climb the mountain corridors towards distant hills, where the Eternal Paradise resorts lay nestled high among the mountain peaks. The workers would come laden with lawn mowers, palm clippers, and tools for manicuring trees and garden ornamentation. Heading in the same direction were small vans displaying advertisements for companies with names such as, Spotless Home, Suzanna Clean, and Matilda and Sisters' Cleaning Services.

The buses would follow set routes along winding roads chiselled into the mountainsides, wending their way up narrow passages until at last they reached Eternal Paradise, where the distant resorts shimmered, and where driveways led to sumptuous mansions whose owners were in constant need of the services provided by maids and manual labourers.

The southern border crossings through which Ni'am Khabbaz and others had made their way into the country were no longer safe for those wanting to attempt the journey. The border guards had secured the vast desert expanses, where countless people had died of thirst like so many animals, their journeys ending before they had begun. The coastal borders had also been secured by placing tetrapods and other sorts of barriers along the shoreline to impede boat landings. However, these measures hadn't put an end to attempts to slip in via merchandise carriers, or on foot over the vast desert expanses that led to "the land of Rising Sun".

Given its geographical location, in fact Rising Sun eventually became the preferred port of entry for migrants. After their arrival, fugitives would hide in its back alleys for several days before continuing their search for a safe route northward through the mountains towards distant vineyards or regions where no one would ask them where they had come from – if, that is, they managed to evade the security patrols that would sweep the mountain roads from time to time. When this happened, some illegal workers would be chased down and forced back across the border, while others would disappear in the hope of being forgotten for a time.

In any case, Ni'am Khabbaz didn't belong to that category. Unlike these others, she had managed to obtain permanent legal residency, and had lived long enough to forget how she had ended up in these parts. According to her account, which was rather vague and might have been a product of her imagination, God had compensated her for her miserable childhood by bringing her to this country. She had come as a carer for the elderly, and for years had worked in nursing homes in the northern resorts. Although she'd forgotten the details, she insisted that she had been brought by means that were entirely legal and above board. Consequently, many had viewed her as lucky, at least until that star-crossed day when she lost her eldest son. However, his loss was neither the first nor the last of the troubles she had seen in her lifetime.

When she was four years old, Ni'am had fallen against a wood stove.

The accident had left deep scars on the right side of her now-aging face, while the scratches intensified the gleam in her beady eyes, giving her the look of an angry fox. The scars had faded somewhat by virtue of the wrinkles she had accumulated over the years. However, she had never tried to hide them. On the contrary, when circumstances required, she had made use of them as proof of the misfortunes she had endured as a child, and as a way of garnering others' sympathy.

As she recalled, it had happened on a wintry day. The streets in the cramped neighbourhoods of her village west of the Delta had turned muddy, and the boys who spent their days running up and down the alleyways were chilled to the bone. Al-Rayyisa (the Boss), as her father's first wife was referred to, had lit the fire and taken her place in the centre of the family room, filling it with the smoke of her waterpipe.

As the first wife and the original owner of the house and the bakery, al-Rayyisa possessed the sole right to dispose of this life's affairs. Together with her in the centre of the family room sat Jaafar Khabbaz. He was dwarfed by her physical presence, which was marked by a distinctly androgenous air, as her voracious smoking had imbued her womanhood with a hint of indelicacy. Every few hours, she would light charcoal in an earthenware container, in part for warmth, and in part in preparation to load the bowl of the waterpipe. She would sit there for hours, periodically lighting the charcoal, taking drags of the waterpipe, and spitting in all directions until her chest was covered with tobacco, phlegm and sputum. In the evenings, a weary Jaafar Khabbaz would take his seat next to her then join her happily puffing the smoke that enveloped their lives in such crudity. Al-Rayyisa would spread her huge hips and he would lay his head in her lap. Then she would hand him the waterpipe. As he placed the tip of the hose in his mouth, the thick, honey-scented smoke would begin to waft through the room, forming clouds that would gradually accumulate over dirty dishes and the children's clutter as they frolicked around the end-of-day scene.

It was on one such night that Ni'am had stumbled onto the stove that was filled with burning embers. As was his custom, Jaafar Khabbaz

had been crouched puppy-like in al-Rayyisa's lap as Umm Ni'am massaged his feet, and his third wife busily prepared tea over the small kerosene burner that sat at one end of the room. As the rain tapped on the windows that night, the flames at the centre of the family room had been rosier and fiercer than usual. Gathered around the warmth, the little ones had been swapping stories and insults, playing cryptic games followed by giggles when suddenly, the scene of familial harmony (which was a rarity in the Khabbaz household) was extinguished by Ni'am's sobs and the sight of her disfigured face.

Jaafar Khabbaz was tall and lean, with the eyes of a mountain fox. Ever on the alert, they exuded both a mischievous gleam and a wisdom born of careful deliberation, while betraying manifold capacities for cruelty and treachery. Ni'am had inherited her father's eyes, but not his genteel Caucasian features, such as the thick blond hair that hung down below his turban and his limpid, fair complexion. The only thing that detracted from his handsome appearance was the tattoo next to the ridge of his right brow. Garbed in a cashmere jilbab, he sat in Ni'am's memory, resting against cushions with his legs outstretched in the midst of his tribe of offspring. Looking flushed and content, he was pleased with the three wives who had borne him a number of males whom he had quickly pressed into service in his bakery, where they divided up tasks such as unloading sacks of flour, mixing, kneading, cutting up the dough, baking and working the ovens.

The work inside the bakery proceeded according to al-Rayyisa's direction, with the various jobs distributed among the three wives' sons without discrimination or favouritism. Since Jaafar married her he had been content just to sit beside her on a mud bench next to the bakery entrance while she monitored bread production and sales and counted the money. The money would end up in a cloth purse that hung on a string from her brassiere, which showed quite visibly from the neckline of her rose-print dress. She would lean forward to take the purse out, her huge breasts sagging, indifferent to the stares of passers-by.

Translated by Nancy Roberts

Fatima Abdulhamid



Fatima Abdulhamid is a Saudi Arabian writer, born in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia in 1982. She graduated with a BA in Psychology and previously worked as a teacher before becoming a psychologist. She has published a short story collection entitled *Like a Paper Plane* (2010) and three novels: *The Edge of Silver* (2013), *F for Female* (2016), and *The Highest Part of the Horizon* (2022).

The Highest Part of the Horizon



The Highest Part of the Horizon is a satirical black comedy, narrated by Azrael, the Angel of Death. He confides in the reader directly about his mission and describes the lives of people he encounters and what they say to him when he arrives to tell them their time is up. Through him, we meet Suleiman, a widower in his fifties, whose mother married him off when he was thirteen to a woman

eleven years his senior. All his life, Suleiman has been looked after by various women, and in his weakness, he is a counterpoint to the stereotypical image of the macho Arab man. Left alone in his flat, Suleiman has a new, unexpected beginning when he falls in love with a neighbour he glimpses in the house opposite. Combining magical realism and psychological exploration, *The Highest Part of the Horizon* seems to imply that planning and predicting the future are impossible, since you will be tricked by life and death, and whatever your choices may be, much is down to chance.

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I'm on my Way to You

Here I am, standing right behind you. My eyes are boring into the back of your head as you read these words. But be patient and don't turn around until I've said everything I've come to say. This isn't just some made-up story. And if I speak to you directly using your own voice, it's because you'd cringe to hear the sound of mine. You'll discover this for certain when we meet face to face – for meet we must, however long you spend outside my reach. Don't check your watch as if the issue of time were all that important to you. You anyway spend most of it living on autopilot. You never opted for right instead of wrong, simply because right takes longer than wrong. So don't cry over your ephemeral soul if I get my hands on you before you get your hands on it. And relax – things aren't that complicated where I'm concerned. There's no one in heaven who's specifically out to destroy you. It's only your earthly nature that's drilled it into you that one man's gain must always be another's loss.

Don't worry: things there don't exist in the same way they do here. Over there, beings don't grow in a vertical line as they do here. Instead, they grow in themselves, and for themselves, far from all others. There are staircases soaring endlessly from the lowest point to the highest, beginning from hell and reaching all the way up to paradise. Each person has their own individual staircase. One person may start their climb at the bottom of the staircase while another may start at the middle and yet a third may start at the top. One person may find that their foot keeps slipping every time they go up a step or two so that they never manage to lift themselves off the bottom, while others may tear up the stairs into the infinite at breathless speed. No one person resembles another, and nobody pays any mind to another. My sempiternal mission is to transport you all from here to there.

So it is! I am your darkest fear, and I make my visits unannounced imparting no confidences, much to the chagrin of those who care about you. Let one thing be clear to you: it makes no difference whether you turn your face to the wall when I show up or whether

you turn your back to it – in neither case will you evade capture. I will prevail and take possession of you.

Don't people say that water that's flowed forth can never be recalled? Here I am, standing right behind you. But be patient and don't turn around!

The fact is that none of the theories circulating across the globe concerning the time I began to fulfil this eternal mission are accurate. Yet how it all began is of no consequence for you. All you need to realise is that I am the final touch, the one that passes over your chronic pain, after a long battle with illness, and makes you ask yourself "Where did all that pain just go?" I am the instinct of fear you've carried with you since you were in your mother's womb. And I assure you that pretending I don't exist won't bring you salvation.

Within the secret recesses of his mind, the Creator determined the distribution of all of the highest offices on grounds inscrutable to created beings. As misfortune would have it, the task of collecting your soul fell exclusively to me. I didn't spring from a line fashioned out of pure light like the rest of the angels, nor was I created from fire after the devils. Instead, I was created out of both light and fire. This was why I was entrusted with this solemn calling – to disburden the earth of the creatures that live upon it. To give credit where credit is due, I don't deserve to be lashed with all this worldly grief and lamentation. I liberate you from many oppressors, not to mention some of those tedious super-rich with all their private jets, and I free some from a life of chronic malady which has sapped their will and the will of those around them.

What I've told you might be unpleasant to hear, but at any rate it's no worse than what you've imputed to me since time immemorial. That's my fate and yours, and nobody can simply excise me from their storyline. Not even Suleiman Ali Al-Rayyes, living in Apartment Block No. 37 just above the Happy Days grocery store in Baddar quarter, two doors down from the garage. Despite my wide knowledge of the world, I'm not at all embarrassed to admit that I found this particular case to be somewhat different. No sooner had I approached him and

entered the story from the back door than the earth gave another spin and I had to take some time to rectify its trajectory.

★ ★ ★

A wise maxim says: “Only pick up a stone if you’re prepared for what might be lurking beneath it, otherwise it’s best to leave it undisturbed.” It’s a worldly principle familiar to many, but a small number of people still manage to remain oblivious to it. This was how it was with Suleiman’s mother, the widow Mrs Hamda, who picked up the said stone when she decided to marry off her only son at the age of thirteen to a girl eleven years his senior, thinking she was prepared for what might be lurking beneath. She drew upon herself the scorn of relatives and neighbours, including above all the fathers of young girls who had refused her earlier approaches with supercilious airs that had left no doubt in her mind that the tender age of their wards would have posed no obstacle to her designs had her son had status or wealth on his side.

She had wanted to keep the family name going by getting ahead of the game, but only five months after marrying her son to her maternal cousin Nabeela she was staring down the barrel of abject failure. Every evening, the bridegroom would abandon his bride and run off to play ball games with his friends, and she burned through all her energy in desperate efforts to drag him back. She would grab him by the ears and shoulders and hustle him home to a musical score of strident tongue-lashing that would make heads turn all along the street. At first, they’d be trailed by his troop of pint-sized friends, mostly schoolmates from the same year, but as they drew closer to home their following would grow and they’d be joined by schoolchildren from every age group and a ragtag of their younger siblings who would bring up the rear chanting in unison: “Suleiman, Suleiman, playing hooky from the house of a newlywed man!” As soon as they were through the door, his mother would wheel him towards his bedroom, which was positioned right at the centre of the house, and was divided from her own

by an empty room already outfitted to receive her future grandchildren. She would then thrust him inside while hissing out the unchanging command: "In you go to do the work of men! I hope you read me loud and clear."

Day in day out, she would turn on him her moon-shaped age-ploughed face and repeat the same command. The style would vary: sometimes she would throw it out irately, sometimes she would say it tenderly, while sometimes it would be with a streak of provocative feminine malevolence which she'd seal with a wink that Suleiman found himself mirroring without quite knowing why. No one could doubt she tried every possible tack, always brandishing that selfsame sentence that so defied his powers of understanding: "Do the work of men!"

One day, at the peak of her despair, she was sitting beside him and stroking his back as she rehearsed her familiar line; she was rocking back and forth, choking back her sobs. Suleiman was seated near the ground, one leg hugged to his chest while the other scraped across the dusty ground before him. He picked out a pebble, held it between his fingers, and then flung it away the way his mother used to do with black grains before putting the rice on to boil. He gave an angry yelp as he stretched out both legs and started thrashing about, whipping up a sudden plume of dust. His mother closed her eyes and heard him say, like someone who had just hit on the magic formula: "I'll do the work of men – but only if you let me play ball with my friends!"

Mrs Hamda's audacious programme for establishing her family line was not without admirers. But their number was outweighed by that of her detractors, all the more when Suleiman's ears began to balloon as a result of all the violent grabbing and yanking, which made them stick out so far from his head that they met the pathological criteria for what doctors call "bat ears". Perhaps this was what eventually led his mother to stop dragging him home by his ears and to make do with the nape of his neck instead. It was at this point in time that Suleiman began to suffer from severe attacks of the hiccups which would continue even while he was asleep, giving his bride sleepless

nights during which she would lie awake listening to his chest kick as if any minute it would burst open.

It took Nabeela one whole year and three months to get Suleiman to fully understand what work men did with their wives when they were all alone.

★ ★ ★

Suleiman had inherited his mother's unsuspecting view of what lurks beneath unturned stones. That was why he woke with a jolt that day, a little before 3 a.m. with pillow marks criss-crossing his cheeks. He was having a fit of hiccups, so he got up to have a drink of water. He pulled back the bedcovers but then threw them to the ground and left the room, walking on tiptoe to avoid contact with the cold floor. He wondered where his grandchildren had hidden his slippers. He didn't have a clear idea where he was headed – he just wanted to get away from that bed and from his sleepless tossing and turning.

Over the last nine days, the passage of time had felt like moving through a wall of cement. Not once in their 38 years had Nabeela been absent from home for so long. He found himself standing around in the kitchen, at a loss how to make a start on the long night. Over the years all sorts of tips about how to deal with insomnia had washed up on his mobile phone, forwarded by someone or other, but it all seemed to have been wiped from his memory. The round lamp that hung down right above his head was projecting a disc of shadow onto the kitchen table. Turning towards the cupboard, he thought to himself consolingly: "Tips for dealing with insomnia are like get-rich-quick schemes – they rarely work."

The first thing you'd notice about Suleiman was his ears, which seemed to belong not to a human being but a bat, and which doubtless entailed the affliction of being able to detect the faintest and most distant sounds. Your attention might next be drawn to his complexion, which was the colour of dry clay, and to a slight tremor on his left cheek. You'd notice that the backs of his hands were thickly covered

with white-tufted hair as he reached out to switch on the stove like a man telling himself he knows what he's doing. The truth was that his way of rummaging through the mass of similar-looking small containers in search of coffee didn't have the remotest appearance of skill. He seemed to have opened several tins more than once without realising. Meanwhile, the water boiling on the stove overflowed, which made him react with a mixture of irritation and alarm.

He then headed for the kitchen balcony, which overlooked the alleyway that ran between his apartment block and the one opposite. He slid open the glass door and stepped outside. The night was drifting like a cloud of thick black smoke. He glanced down briefly – no special reason, just the classic human reflex when opening balcony doors and windows. When he went back indoors, the smell of gas wasn't too strong in the air, but he still upbraided himself for leaving the coffee pot unattended. Suddenly he had his mother's voice in his ear, on its usual mission of cataloguing and censuring his errors. "A watched pot never boils. Why don't you just let it look after itself for a while?" He flicked his ear rather less civilly than befits the voices of mothers and dabbed at the back of his neck, which suddenly felt strangely moist. Then he went back to rummaging for coffee among the similar-looking tins.

It was at that moment that his ears picked up the sound of singing coming from the window on the opposite side of the alley, no more than three metres from where he stood. It was a playful voice with a Syrian accent that was singing with what sounded like an entire supportive chorus of pure joy. "How fair those grizzled hairs / They make a man so fine and grave / We might be old in years / But we're young at heart / Whoever said love's a sin?"

Something about the use of the plural made Suleiman feel this song was also meant for him. The big-eared man broke into a smile, feeling the strong tug of an impulse to raise his bear-like voice and join in. He found himself smoothing down his hair and inspecting his reflection on the glass cover of the stove while his head began to swing to the joyful rhythm.

Instantly, he remembered where his wife stored the coffee. She kept it in a remote corner of the kitchen – “So it doesn’t pick up the smell of spices”, as she once explained. Human memory is a wonderful thing: at a single stroke, it imparted to him not only the exact details of the coffee’s whereabouts but also a justification for its out-of-the-way location delivered in his wife’s voice – that voice with its permanent swagger of “I know best”. Because she was the older one and she was the one with more experience, and it had always been that way ever since their wedding night. With a thrill of elation, he went straight to the spot he remembered, and grinned broadly as the aroma of the black substance wafted up to him from the bottom of the tin. It was not a bad moment to mutter a prayer for dear Nabeela’s soul.

With the prayer on his lips, and having placed a heaped spoon of coffee grounds in the pot, he turned back towards the direction that the charming song was coming from. He was stunned to find a woman standing right in front him, with nothing but that narrow alley between them. She was holding a bowl in her hand in which she was whipping something very slowly, and she was gazing towards him. The mango-coloured walls of her kitchen created a backdrop that made it look like the darkest kitchen he’d ever seen in his life. Or maybe it was his imagination, because the singing had now also grown quieter, and maybe it had the effect of making the light look dimmer. She had to be over forty, even though she struck him as younger than that. As soon as she spotted him staring at her, she swiftly retreated from view, though he could still see the shadows cast by her hands through the gossamer white curtains at her kitchen window. His eyes remained glued to what he could discern through the curtains, as if any moment he was expecting her to pull a rabbit out of a black hat and he’d then burst into wild applause. He was able to make out her well-rounded figure, her tender arms, and her regal build. He frantically cast about for a conversation starter, and having failed to come up with anything he felt obliged to offer an apology – he wasn’t sure what for, but courtesy at the very least seemed to require it.

“I’m sorry – I’m sorry.”

He said these words twice while clinging to the edge of the balcony; a distant onlooker might have supposed he was about to cast himself into the narrow alley that separated them. He was moving towards the conclusion that this woman, who was standing there rooted to the spot, didn't have any feelings he could risk injuring, when he was distracted by the realisation that his coffee had boiled over, so he turned to the pot, feeling quite flustered. It occurred to him that he'd now put the fire out twice in the space of an hour, and he reflected that Nabeela would have been up in arms if she'd seen that sort of frivolous behaviour taking place in her kitchen. He then returned to the balcony, with the intention of completing his set of apologies, as it would seem, by adding a third. But the light, the song, and the sheltering lady had all vanished from the kitchen opposite, as if they had been a dream, and a sealed window was the only truth that remained.

Translated by Sophia Vasalou

Zahran Alqasmi



Zahran Alqasmi is an Omani poet and novelist, born in Dima Wattayeen in the Sultanate of Oman in 1974. He has published four novels: *Mountain of the Horseradish Tree* (2013), *The Sniper* (2014), *Hunger for Honey* (2017), and *The Exile of the Water Diviner* (2021), as well as ten poetry collections, *Biography of the Stone 1* (short story collection, 2009) and *Biography of the Stone 2* (non-fiction, 2011).

The Exile of the Water Diviner



In its Arabic meaning, a “narrator” is someone who – literally – “waters” people and satisfies their thirst, and *The Exile of the Water Diviner* restores this original function to its narrator. Set in an Omani village, it tells the story of a water diviner employed by the villages to track springs of water hidden deep in the earth. Since birth, his life has had a profound connection with

water: His mother drowned, and his father was buried when the roof of one of the water channels – or *aflaj* – collapsed on him. The diviner himself ends up imprisoned in a water channel, battling for his life. The novel’s subject matter is a new departure in the Arabic novel, steeped in the history of the *aflaj*, a farming system of garden irrigation which is inextricably linked to village life in Oman, and has become the inspiration of many stories and legends.

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A DROWNED WOMAN, A DROWNED WOMAN. The village crier's voice filled al-Misfah village as he knocked on people's doors and called out: "A drowned woman, a drowned woman. Someone has drowned in Khatam Well."

The women heard his call, and searched for their children in their houses and yards. One woman screamed and wailed in the middle of the road because she couldn't find her ten-year-old son anywhere. A quarrel broke out between two women in an alley separating two houses because the child of one of them had gone out early that morning with the other woman's child and they hadn't returned.

A very old lady got up and, with the aid of her walking stick, tried to catch up with the village crier. A short young man sprang up from his siesta and ran non-stop until he reached the well. Screaming and shouting could be heard at the edge of the village, mixed with a dog barking in the adjacent neighbourhood, the squawking of chickens around the palm groves and the braying of a donkey at the far end of the wadi.

The young men vied to help the village crier convey the news to faraway houses. The mountains echoed the sound of a large drum, a hot westerly wind whistled and assailed people's faces and the trunks of trees. Many sounds mingled, turning the village's usual afternoon calm into nervous agitation.

The sleepy roads became thronged with villagers hurrying towards the well.

The village crier Hamdan bin Ashour, who lived close to the well, had jolted the village with his call after Old Greyhead Hameed Bou 'Uyoun had knocked at his door and said: "Announce to everyone in the village, there's a drowned woman in the well."

That day, Hamdan had eaten his lunch later than usual because he had returned late from the neighbouring village, where he had gone

early that morning looking for melon seeds that someone had told him were the best of their kind and could only be found from a man who lived in that village. Hamdan had remained at the man's house and waited a long time until he discovered where the man had hidden the seeds. When he returned and spread out his lunch, he had only eaten a few mouthfuls when he heard Old Greyhead Hameed Bou 'Uyoun calling him and knocking at his door. When he went out, he found him shaking as though the news he was about to give him would be the death of him.

At first, Hamdan was flustered. It was the first time he was assuming the role of village crier. He quickly left home, barefoot, without a head cover, only wearing a short shirt and loin cloth, and began knocking at doors and shouting in the streets in his sonorous voice: "A drowned woman, a drowned woman."

People had nicknamed Old Greyhead Hameed "Bou 'Uyoun", Sharp Eyes, because of his strong and accurate sight. Although he had acquired that name in his youth, his sight remained strong despite his eighty years. He could see far into the distance in a way that others could not, and he was able to recognise people as they approached from afar. He could also make out the villagers' animals when they strayed into the mountains and neighbouring valleys, and he would recognise them and know who they belonged to.

Khatam Well was not on his normal route home, and it was by some strange coincidence that he had passed by it at noon that day. It was also strange that as he passed by it he had looked down to the bottom, as though he had been commanded to do so by some voice. As he did so, he caught sight of the outlines of a human form in the dark water. He narrowed his eyes until they were almost shut and continued to stare into the water in the well to make out what was actually there.

He could see a corpse, a drowned person. He rubbed his eyes thoroughly, then opened them again and looked down carefully, to be sure of what he had seen. However, he couldn't make out the identity of the drowned person because the well was deep and dark.

It was a summer noon, glowing with heat. The westerly wind and

the dryness of the wadis meant the place was unbearable at that time of day. It was a time of rest, when people would lie beneath the trees after sprinkling water on the soil to cool the air around them, but this time fear gripped their hearts and they were curious to discover who the drowned person was, a fact the village crier had not revealed. So everyone left their shady spots and ran towards the well.

There was a lot of noise as people crowded around the well, asking about the drowned person. Who was he? What had happened to him? Why had no one seen him descending into the well? What had he been looking for? Was he a villager, or a stranger? Who had found him, and how had Bou 'Uyoun managed to see him despite how deep the well was? Had he fallen by accident, or had someone pushed him? Many questions were being asked by those present, each one anxious to find out what had happened.

The crowd formed in the following way: someone would run up, stare into the dark shadows and deep water until the form of a person would become visible, a person whose features and sex could not be recognised. This pattern repeated itself. A woman said, as she covered her mouth with a scarf: "It looks like a rag."

A man in his twenties said: "I can't see a drowned person."

An old man shook his head as he responded: "You're the only one drowning."

The young man fell silent and hung his head in shame.

The well was so deep it required an experienced man to descend as the slightest slip could kill him, particularly since the bottom was rocky and not flat. So the village crier's next task was to bring over a volunteer to climb down to the bottom of the well.

Saif bin Hmoud was one of the first to hear the village crier's call, and he quickly left his home for the well. He was a well-built man with a strong muscular body. He was well known in the village for his ability to always find a solution to any problem he faced, so there was no need for anyone to ask him to descend to the bottom of the well to pull out the drowned woman; everyone automatically looked to him.

But when Saif bin Hmoud was lowered by a rope into the well, down below the water line, he saw the open eyes of the drowned woman staring angrily at him. He shook with terror, and almost choked on the water and drowned. He tugged violently at the rope and shouted to the people around the well to pull him out. When he got up to the top edge of the well, he was still shaking, and cried out deliriously: "The drowned woman can see, she can see, she devoured me, her eyes devoured me."

He fled back to his home, shut himself in and covered himself with a heavy woollen cloak.

Old Greyhead 'Areeq realised that no one could get to the bottom of the well except for a man they called al-Wa'ri, the Rugged Man, so he told everyone: "Al-Wa'ri's your man." Al-Wa'ri Salam wad 'Amour had a brave heart and feared nothing at all. He never hesitated to do anything he was asked, or anything he himself decided to do. He would climb tall palm trees and steep hilltops, or descend to very deep water holes and old wells. He would spend many a night in the mountains on his own, and rarely mixed with people.

The man who volunteered to tell Wad 'Amour ran off to where he usually took an afternoon nap on his small farm, away from roads and people. He had put his head down on a small red pillow, shut his eyes and begun to enjoy a feeling of sleepiness when the man arrived at the edge of his farm shouting: "Hey, al-Wa'ri." He jumped up to see what was happening. It was the first time anyone had called him in that way or approached his farm at that time of day. He came out red-eyed, with ruffled hair and a thick beard. That was his usual look, and it inspired fear and dread in others.

The man told him what had happened, and Wad 'Amour hurried back with him without going back indoors, running barefoot until he reached the well.

When he got there, he placed one foot on the edge of the well, and the other foot on the opposite edge. He held onto the two edges with his hands and began to descend down the shaft of the well until he got close to the surface of the water. Then he took hold of the rope

dangling from above, took a deep breath, and jumped towards the bottom, disappearing from view.

He remained out of sight for a long time, and the anxiety of those waiting at the top mounted. In the meantime, he was wrapping the rope around the corpse so that it would not fall as it was being pulled up. When he caught sight of its open eyes, he stretched out his hand and closed the lids, saying “God is mighty”. Then, he started to bring it up. He shouted from deep within the well to those above to start pulling up the body, and remained where he was until he was sure it had been brought to the surface. Then he ascended by climbing up the stones on each side without asking for anyone’s help.

The corpse was brought out and laid down near the side of the well. Wailing broke out as soon as people recognised who it was. It was the body of Mariam bint Hamad wad Ghanem – Mariam, daughter of Hamad, son of Ghanem. A circle of women formed around it, some crying quietly, while others sobbed: “Mariam is gone.”

Her husband Abdullah bin Jumayyel was present. He drew close to her and stared at her, unable to believe what had happened. What had prompted his wife, who feared going near the edge of any well, to get so close to that deep well and drown in it? But there she was, laid out on the ground before him, her eyes shut, water trickling from her body, her scarf having slipped off her head and become wound around her neck like a rope.

As was the custom, they quickly began to wash her and cover her in a shroud so that she could be buried at the village cemetery. As they were putting her in the shroud, her aunt Aisha bint Mabrouk suddenly shouted: “There’s life in her belly, there’s life in her belly.”

One of the women examined her belly, felt the foetus moving, and jumped up, shaking with agitation.

A melancholy silence prevailed. What should they do? Would it be right to open the belly of the dead woman to remove her foetus, or must it be buried with her?

There were conflicting opinions, and a noisy state of confusion. Sheikh Hamed bin Ali, the jurist whom everyone listened to,

sprang up from where he was sitting at the far edge of the crowd, saying: “What’s in her belly should be buried with her.”

Old Greyhead Hameed Bou ‘Uyoun leaned on a tree trunk and spoke as though to himself, but it was clear his words were directed at Sheikh Hamed: “What’s forcing you to decide who should live and who shouldn’t?”

The sheikh overheard him, and looked at him angrily, saying: “That’s what religious law says.”

Old Greyhead Bou ‘Uyoun tapped the muddy ground between his feet with his stick and retorted: “You will bear responsibility for this till the day of judgement.”

Sheikh Hamed was enraged by Bou ‘Uyoun’s words, and his voice grew sharper as he yelled back at him: “What business is it of yours to interfere in something you know nothing about?”

Bou ‘Uyoun got up and went to the spot where everyone was gathered around Sheikh Hamed bin Ali and said, as he pointed his stick towards the laid out corpse: “That is a life. You would bury a human being alive and sentence it to death, and then say that’s religious law?”

As the row raged on and absorbed people’s attention, Kathiya bint Ghanem pulled a dagger from the belt of one of the men present. She lifted the drowned woman’s cloak, cut open her belly and slipped her hands in to bring out the child from the womb. As soon as she severed the umbilical chord and held the child up like any experienced midwife, everyone heard it cry.

As people registered the infant’s cries, they turned towards the source of the sound in amazement. She smiled at them amidst the tragedy and said as her eyes filled with tears: “How beautiful he is. God’s blessings upon Mohammad, He brings forth the living from the dead, He brings forth the living from the dead, He brings forth the living from the dead.”

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It was customary to mention Mariam bint Hamad wad Ghanem's name in full. She was never merely referred to as Mariam, or Mariam bint Hamad. Her name had to be mentioned in full for several reasons, the most important of which was that many women in the village of Misfah were called Mariam. There was Mariam bint Ibrahim, and Mariam al-Jaloula, and Mariam Halissa Malissa and many others, several of whom were called Mariam bint Hamad. So if anyone were to say "Mariam bint Hamad" and no more, he would quickly be asked, "Which Mariam bint Hamad?"

The Mariam who had drowned was the wife of Abdullah bin Jumayyel, a farmer who worked on the outskirts of the village. He would spend most of his time watering the palm trees and taking care of crops. Their owners would pay him an agreed wage, or give him some of the harvest.

Abdullah bin Jumayyel's house had been built on a hill in al-Qa'tah neighbourhood. It was solitary and surrounded by palm trees and crops. At the bottom of the hill was a very old and huge sycamore fig tree, beneath which ran the mountain path to the other side of the village. A nearby lote tree shaded the area, making it an ideal spot for the pen in which the cows and sheep that Mariam took care of were kept.

During droughts, al-Qa'tah neighbourhood, which was at the far end of the village, would echo with the sound of water pumps as Khatam Well was opposite it and Bahrain Well north of it. Water wheels would operate day and night to bring out water. Mariam bint Hamad wad Ghanem used to like falling asleep at night to their sound. Their repetitive music would reach her and give a feeling of calm, and she would fall asleep to that thirsty melody, as each water wheel filled the night with its musical sound.

The only structure close to the al-Qa'tah home, as people used to call it, was an old cemetery, with its stones spread across the mountainside. So the house was isolated and quiet, and its door was only knocked on when that was necessary. But the voices of passersby from the path on the other side also reached the house, making it seem

more familiar and less frightening, despite the cemetery and tales about those buried there.

During the day, people taking that pathway used to enjoy taking a break beneath the sycamore fig tree to eat a few dates and drink a few cups of coffee, which bin Jumayyel would leave out for them. A waterskin filled with cold water hung from one of its branches, available for anyone thirsty to open and pour the water into his insides.

Mariam usually took a container to fill up with water from the spring, from which other villagers also drew their water. She would climb the mountain path until she got to the spring, from where she would draw the water she needed for drinking, cooking, cleaning and keeping the cattle watered. Despite the arduous effort of using that path, she would do it several times a day – once in the early morning, once just before noon and then in the afternoon. Sometimes she would be forced to make the trip more often, going up the mountain path and coming back down many times to meet all her water needs.

Mariam was the best clothes embroiderer in the village. She had a light, rapid, very adept touch. This provoked the jealousy of other women, but they were unable to compete with her, so rich families continued to ask her to embroider clothes, and the fees she earned from her work were enough to provide her and her husband with a living, without any need for charity.

Mariam bin Hamad wad Ghanem's life was quiet and comfortable, and she experienced nothing negative. Since she had moved into that house five years before, she had experienced nothing but appreciation and much love from Abdullah bin Jumayyel.

But she did not conceive for several years, and some women began attributing this to the scary location of the house, on account of its proximity to the graveyard.

One of her clients suggested that she should make some vows. Another suggested that she should spread some incense close to the graveyard at sunset. But Mariam bint Hamad wad Ghanem paid no heed to all that, and only implemented the suggestion of using incense whenever she fancied.

Some months later, she stopped menstruating and her belly began to protrude. She went to see the elderly midwife Shamsah bint Khalifa, to whom all the women in the village resorted. She examined her and confirmed that she was pregnant.

Translated by Samira Kawar



The 2022 Judging Panel

CHAIR OF JUDGES

MOHAMMED ACHAARI is a Moroccan writer and novelist, born in Zerhoun, Morocco. He studied Law at Mohammed V University and began publishing his first poems and stories in Moroccan newspapers in the late 1960s, before becoming a columnist and editor-in-chief of the cultural supplement of the Socialist Union newspaper. For three consecutive years, he was head of the Moroccan Writers' Union. His political work led him to be imprisoned, but he was later appointed Minister of Culture and then Minister of Culture and Communication between 1998 and 2007, in the first two-chamber government in the history of Morocco. He has published 12 poetry collections and six novels, including *The Arch and the Butterfly*, joint winner of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2011, *The Box of Names* (2014), *Three Nights* (2017), *The Old Spring* (2019), and *From Wood and Clay* (2021). He won the International Argana Poetry Award (2020) in recognition of his poetry. His work has been translated into a number of languages.



MEMBERS OF THE PANEL

REEM BASSIOUNEY is a lecturer and Head of the Department of Linguistics at the American University of Cairo. She is editor of the Routledge Studies in Language and Identity, and editor and creator of the Journal of *Arabic Sociolinguistics*. After graduating from Alexandria University, she obtained an MA and PhD from Oxford University. She has taught in British and American universities



and published several novels. In 2009, she received the Translation of Arabic Literature Award, given for the best translated work of fiction by the King Fahd Center for Middle East Studies, Arkansas University, for her novel *The Pistachio Seller* (2009). This was followed in 2010 by the Sawiris Cultural Award granted by the Egyptian Higher Council for Culture for her novel *Dr. Hanaa* (2007); the 2020 Naguib Mahfouz Medal for *The Mamluk Trilogy* (2018), which was also nominated for the Dublin Literary Award and is currently being adapted into a TV drama; and the State Prize for Excellence in Literature (2022) for the body of her literary work. Her novels have been translated into English, Greek and Spanish. Several of her academic books have been published in Europe and America.



FADHILA EL FAROUK is an Algerian novelist and researcher. She has more than thirty years' experience in the field of cultural journalism (newspapers, radio, and television) and has published six books, including novels, short stories and poetry. Her work has been translated into English, French, and Spanish, amongst other languages. She launched a television programme to equip viewers of all educational levels with reading skills

and presented over 600 books to viewers on Al Araby television, in many cases accurately predicting award-winning titles. She has maintained her interest in encouraging reading from the early 1990s onwards. El Farouk has been a vocal advocate of improving the conditions of women and reform of laws which affect them negatively.



TETZ ROOKE is a Swedish university professor, researcher and translator, born in 1955. In 1997, he obtained a PhD in Arabic Language and Literature from Stockholm University, Sweden, and he is now a professor at Gothenburg University. He has translated over twenty literary works from Arabic into Swedish, including novels, short stories, poetry and plays, as well as publishing numerous academic studies on modern Arabic literature and translation in particular. One of his books, entitled *In My Childhood* (1997), is a study of Arabic autobiography of childhood, as exemplified by Arab writers, and was translated into Arabic in 2002.

AZIZA AL-TA'I is a writer and academic from Oman. She obtained a BA in Arabic Literature and a Diploma in Education from the Jordanian University, an MA from Sultan Qaboos University, Oman, and a PhD in Modern Literary Criticism from the University of Tunis. She has worked as an Arabic language teaching supervisor and an educational expert in the Omani Ministry of



Education and Teaching. Al-Ta'i lectures at Sultan Qaboos University and has published novels, short stories, poetry and children's literature. She has contributed to research and academic publications and is a member of the editing board of the *Eyes of Narrative* magazine published by the University of Tetouan, Morocco. Her poetry collection *Take My Hand, Since Autumn Has Gone* won the second iteration of the Prize for Gulf Women Writers, in 2019. Extracts from her poetry, stories and novels have been translated into German, Spanish, Italian and Bosnian.

The Translators

Raphael Cohen is a translator based in Cairo. He has translated a growing number of novels by contemporary Arab authors including *Flowers in Flames* by Amir Taj el-Sir (2022), *Guard of the Dead* by George Yarak (2019), *The Art*

of *Forgetting* (2011) and *The Bridges of Constantine* (2014) by Ahlem Mosteghanemi and *So You May See* by Mona Prince (2011). He is the translator of *The Madness of Despair* by Ghayla FT Al Said, and translated and introduced *Poems of Alexandria and New York* by Ahmed Morsi (both Banipal Books, 2021). He is also the translator of *The Jewish Agency* and *Syria during the Arab Revolt in Palestine* by Mahmoud Muhareb (2022).

Samira Kawar is an experienced energy journalist who served as Middle East Editor at London-based energy publishing house Argus Media since 1999 until she resigned that post in March 2015 to concentrate on literary translation. She has contributed translations to Banipal magazine since its foundation in 1998, and is a trustee of the Banipal Trust for Arab Literature. Her translations include *The Baghdad Villa* by Zuheir El-Hetti (2023), *The Eye of the Mirror* by Liana Badr (2008) and Abdul Rahman Munif's *Story of a City: A Childhood in Amman* (1996). She is an experienced TV and radio journalist, working for Reuters TV, Worldwide Television News (WTN, now known as APTV), NBC News and BBC World Service Radio. She has also written on the Middle East for *The Washington Post* and *The Jordan Times*.

Nancy Roberts is an Arabic-to-English translator, editor and independent researcher in the areas of modern Arabic literature, current affairs (environment, human rights, economy, law), Christian-Muslim relations, and Islamic thought and history. She won the 1994 University of Arkansas Translation Prize for her rendering of Ghada Samman's *Beirut '75*. Her translation of Salwa Bakr's *The Man From Bashmour* was commended by the 2008 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize, and her translations of Ibrahim Nasrallah's *Gaza Weddings, Lanterns of the King of Galilee* and *Time of White Horses* earned her the 2018 Sheikh Hamad Prize for Translation and International Understanding. Other translations include fiction works by Ahlem Mosteghanemi, Laila Aljohani, Abd al-Rahman Farsi, Ezzat Kamhawi and Ahlam Bsharat. Her most recent literary translations are Najwa Bin Shatwan's *The Slave Yards, Things I Left Behind* by Shada Mustafa, and *The Night Will Have Its Say* by Ibrahim al-Koni.

Paul Starkey was a judge on the inaugural year of IPAF and is an award-winning translator. His most recent translations include *The Bookseller's Notebooks* by Jalal Barjas (2021 IPAF winner), *Drowning* by Hammour Ziada, *Sarajevo Firewood* by Saïd Khatibi (2020 IPAF shortlist), Mahmoud Shukair's *Praise for the Women of the Family* (2016 IPAF shortlist) and Mustafa Khalifa's

The Shell by Mustafa Khalifa (joint 2017 Sheikh Hamad Award for Translation and International Understanding). He is Emeritus Professor at Durham University, Chair of the Banipal Trust for Arab Literature and a contributing editor of *Banipal*. Earlier translations include works by Rashid al-Daif, Edwar al-Kharrat, Turki al-Hamad, Mansoura Ez Eldin, Jurji Zaydan, Mahdi Issa al-Saqr, Adania Shibli and Youssef Rakha (winner of the 2015 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize). Further works include studies of Tawfiq al-Hakim (*From the Ivory Tower*) and of Sonallah Ibrahim (*Rebel with a Pen*), *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature* and *Modern Arabic Literature*.

Sophia Vasalou studied Arabic in London and has a PhD in Islamic theology from the University of Cambridge. She is currently associate professor in philosophical theology at Birmingham University. She is the author of several books, including *Moral Agents and their Deserts: The Character of Mu'tazilite Ethics* (2008), *Schopenhauer and the Aesthetic Standpoint: Philosophy as a Practice of the Sublime* (2013) and *Ibn Taymiyya's Theological Ethics* (2016). Her translation of the philosophical anthology *The Philosopher Responds* (al-Hawamil wa'l-shawamil) by the tenth-century intellectuals al-Tawhidi and Miskawayh, and the IPAF-shortlisted novel *The Old Woman and the River* (Al-Sabiliyat) by the Kuwaiti writer Ismail Fahd Ismail, appeared in 2019.

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. His translation of Hassan Blasim's *The Iraqi Christ* won the 2014 Independent Foreign Fiction Prize. Other translations also 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). His most recent translation is *The Disappearance of Mr Nobody* by Ahmed Taibaoui.