



الجائزة العالمية للرواية العربية
INTERNATIONAL PRIZE FOR ARABIC FICTION

The International Prize for Arabic Fiction

The Shortlist 2020



Abdelouahab Aissaoui
The Spartan Court



Khalil Alrez
The Russian Quarter



Jabbour Douaihy
The King of India



Said Khatibi
Firewood of Sarajevo



Alia Mamdouh
The Tank



Youssef Ziedan
*Fardeqan – the Detention of the
Great Sheikh*



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INTERNATIONAL PRIZE FOR ARABIC FICTION

Excerpts from the 2020 Shortlist



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Contents

Introductions	4
Foreword by Chair of Judges Muhsin al-Musawi	8
Excerpts from the shortlisted novels	
<i>The Spartan Court</i> by Abdelouahab Aissaoui	12
<i>The Russian Quarter</i> by Khalil Alrez	20
<i>The King of India</i> by Jabbour Douaihy	28
<i>Firewood of Sarajevo</i> by Said Khatibi	37
<i>The Tank</i> by Alia Mamdouh	46
<i>Fardeqan – the Detention of the Great Sheikh</i> by Youssef Ziedan	54
The 2020 Judging Panel	64
The Translators	66



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 in Abu Dhabi.

The Prize is run with the support, as its mentor, of the Booker Prize Foundation in London and funded by the Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi (DCT). 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 announcement of the winner takes place in Abu Dhabi in spring on the eve of the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair.

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

ment 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 annual nadwa (writers' workshop) for a group of emerging writers from across the Arab world. Established in 2009, the nadwa was the first of its kind for Arab writers. Each year it results in new fiction by some of the Arab world's most promising authors, some of whom have gone on to have works entered, be shortlisted and even win the Prize.

Nine Nadwas have taken place in Abu Dhabi (eight under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Hamdan bin Zayed Al-Nahyan and in 2017 supported by Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation. Others have been held in Jordan, Oman and Sharjah, in partnership with, respectively, the Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation, the Muscat Cultural Club and the Department of Culture – Sharjah Government.

For more information:
www.arabicfiction.org



The Booker Prize Foundation

The Booker Prize Foundation is a registered charity, established in 2002, responsible for the award of The Booker Prize for Fiction and The International Booker Prize. It has supported the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, as its mentor, since its inception.

The Booker Prize is the leading literary award in the English speaking world, and has brought recognition, reward and readership to outstanding fiction for over five decades. Each year, the prize is awarded to what is, in the opinion of the judges, the best novel of the year written in English and published in the UK and Ireland. Both the winner and the shortlisted authors are guaranteed a global readership plus a dramatic increase in book sales.

The International Booker Prize is awarded annually for a single book, translated into English and published in the UK or Ireland. The vital work of translators is celebrated, with the prize money divided equally between the author and translator.

The symmetrical relationship between The Booker Prize for Fiction and The International Booker Prize ensures that The Booker Prizes honour fiction and writing on a global basis.

For more information:
www.thebookerprizes.com



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Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi

The Department of Culture and Tourism conserves and promotes the heritage and culture of Abu Dhabi emirate and leverages them in the development of a world-class, sustainable destination of distinction that enriches the lives of visitors and residents alike. The Department manages the emirate's tourism sector and markets the destination internationally through a wide range of activities aimed at attracting visitors and investment. Its policies, plans and programmes relate to the preservation of heritage and culture, including protecting archaeological and historical sites and to developing museums, including the Louvre Abu Dhabi, the Zayed National Museum and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. The Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi supports intellectual and artistic activities and cultural events to nurture a rich cultural environment and honour the emirate's heritage. A key role played by the Department is to create synergy in the destination's development through close co-ordination with its wide-ranging stakeholder base.

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FOREWORD

These six novels offer excellent examples of technique and of the art of writing and narration. They include content that is fresh and new, and even when some of them seem to be set in a narrative context that lies in the past, the authors are professionals who are inclined to discover the exotic and the ambiguous, even in local and colonial records and biographies. These are presented in forms that easily draw in readers in thoughtful and engaging ways. The novels include aspects of misfortune and sadness too, but this shows that they belong to a reality that is stranger than fiction.

The Spartan Court by Abdelouahab Aissaoui

Undoubtedly a historical novel, but unlike the novels of Jurji Zaidan and his generation. The historical records, local and colonial, undergo deconstruction through multiple intersecting voices. There's a colonialist who enforces occupation brutally and relentlessly and a compatriot whose conduct can hardly be interpreted in a way that proves all colonialists are devoid of the attributes that keep them within the fold of humankind. A third character is a leftover from the

Ottoman administration and does everything he can to preserve a system of government that has been feeble and ailing for many years. Two indigenous characters, a man and a woman, do their best to challenge the occupation authorities and thwart them at various turns. Aissaoui's novel is an evocation of the past through the power of the present and its ramifications.

The Tank by Alia Mamdouh

This novel is a construct par excellence. The level of experimentation in it qualifies it as an unsettling piece of writing. It does not pretend to be linear or easily accessible through unbroken chronological sequencing. It is something else. As a construct it has an architecture, while its mood is imbued with lamentation for the plight of Baghdad, a city that has been in its death throes for some time thanks to armies of occupation, militias and death squads. Pride of place goes to the Baghdad districts of Safena, Aadamiya, Hariri Street and Tank Street, which appear as spaces that have been ravished and plundered and from which the local people have been forced to flee. The narrative is a quest for these places and the narrator is no longer a fugitive: she roams the streets as if seeking revenge for a country that is lost. The novel forces the reader to come fully prepared and mentally equipped to read the intersections between the visual image and the story that is told. Characters and their relatives are entangled in ordeals that are dangerous and possibly lethal. But the novel also contains humour, as well as reminders of Sayed Darwish's songs and Sufi texts.

Fardeqan – the Detention of the Great Sheikh by Youssef Ziedan

This novel reimagines a period in the life of the polymath and philosopher Ibn Sina (Avicenna), with all the circumstances of his career, his scholarship and his philosophy, which seem larger than the

reality that is portrayed. The novelist makes this chapter of Ibn Sina's life exuberant and rich in revealing and stimulating conversations. It is written in a style that combines historical and literary narrative, making the novel both informative and a pleasure to read.

The Russian Quarter by Khalil Alrez

Dogs, cats, giraffes and lions have never appeared in such profusion in an Arabic novel. In this case they emerge in a calm, unhurried narrative that seeks to surprise readers with the humanity they have lost as a result of being immersed in radio and television news that ensures the objectification of life, along with the implications of being at war. This novel forces us to see war in all its brutality, ferocity and destructiveness. It uses the animals to confront the reader with ambiguous scenes where doubt or certainty, and right or wrong, are not in question, but rather death, which knows no meaning and makes no distinctions. It is an evocation of amorality and for that reason is a quest for the kind of sensibility that humans can easily lose under the influence of propaganda and information overload.

The King of India by Jabbour Douaihy

This novel draws the reader to the plight of the individual and thence to the plight of societies unable to provide their citizens with stability and security, leaving emigration as a last resort. With emigration comes fear, love, adventure and then return after loss, deprivation and anguish. The return, instead of being a great achievement, can be a quest for something that is missing and a deliberate attempt at effacement. *The King of India* is enticing and entertaining. It combines a whodunit with the bohemianism of love, the brutality of reality and a delight in adventure.

Firewood of Sarajevo by Said Khatibi

This is more than a novel. We might call it another Tale of Two Cities, Algiers and Sarajevo. A father escapes in search of a refuge from himself and from what remains, only to see himself violating the past that preoccupies the mind and the soul. The novel is also the story of the son the father had abandoned as an infant in the belief that he was the child's uncle. With the belated discovery of the true relationship, the novel seems to portray fatherhood as impossible or like a deep wound from years of wars, militias and unrest, with a little love and much risk.

Muhsin al-Musawi
Chair of Judges, 2020

The Spartan Court

by

Abdelouahab Aissaoui



Abdelouahab Aissaoui is an Algerian novelist, born in Djelfa, Algeria, in 1985. He graduated in Electromechanical Engineering from Zayan Ashour University in Djelfa and works as a maintenance engineer. In 2012, his first novel, *Jacob's Cinema*, came first in the novel category of the President of the Republic Prize. He won the Assia Djebar Prize, widely regarded as the most important prize for the novel in Algeria, for his second novel, *Mountain of Death* (2015), which tells the story of Spanish communists imprisoned in North African camps after losing the Spanish Civil War. In 2016, he took part in the IPAF “Nadwa” (creative writing workshop for talented young writers). His third novel *Circles and Doors* (2017) won the 2017 Kuwaiti Suad al-Sabah Novel Prize, and also in 2017, he won the Katara Novel Prize in the unpublished novel category, for *Testament of the Deeds of the Forgotten Ones*. *The Spartan Court* was published in 2018.

Dupond
Marseille, March 1833

In this world, my esteemed friend Dupond, God is the Devil, yet you still believe that all women are Mary Magdalene, every leader an epiphany of the Saviour. Your mind is so deluded that I feel sorry for you. Wake up, Dupond. Wake up, or go back to Marseille.

Your archfriend, Caviard

Twelve years after Napoleon's death and three years since the fall of Algeria, those words still resound through my head. In not one letter did my old friend want to retract them.

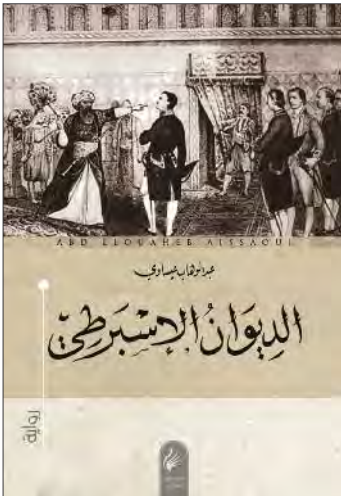
Roaming the streets of Marseille, I sense that people have become oblivious to the turmoil of the past few years and that visit by the Dauphin. Ah, sorry, there is no Dauphin anymore, not since they revolted against him and he too became an exile, just a pale and fleeting shadow in feeble memory. In kingship, twenty minutes is much the same as twenty years; Louis XIX or Napoleon, pas de différence! Who, I wonder, still preserved the dreams of the madman who wanted to be crowned king of the world? His name had continued to stir in the memory of the people, but of them all, the most impassioned and inflamed by the mad leader's life story was my friend Caviard. I liked to call him the fallen Saul, and he laughed when he heard it. He agreed with the merchants of Marseille that remaining in that Spartan city rising beyond the sea would benefit the French. Surely, merchants in Marseille did not only want it as a memorial to their past glories, but for other reasons. Money, as Saul would say, is a new god, and how many gods there are! Gods at sea and others on land.

"Dupond . . . Dupond!" his voice calls me from beyond the horizon, mocking my fantasies. Imagining him behind me, I turn around suddenly and see faces I do not recognize, their bodies hidden in wool overcoats, hurriedly roaming the streets. My gaze stretches to the end of the road, to the blueness and the harbour. My friend is standing

there smoking his pipe, or so it seems. Could Caviard really have returned? But Caviard chose his fate when we parted two years before in North Africa. He blew smoke in my face and said: “My dear Dupond, go back to Marseille and your newspaper. People like you won’t do for life here. One bout of dysentery would be enough to kill you. I know more about this land and these barbarians than anyone else. You can’t possibly believe that what you are doing or what you

About *The Spartan Court*

The novel follows the interconnected lives of five characters in Algiers from 1815 to 1833. The first is a French journalist covering the colonial campaign against Algeria and the second is a former soldier in Napoleon’s army who finds himself a prisoner in the city and then a planner for the campaign. The other three



Algerian characters have different attitudes to the Ottoman and French colonial powers. Ibn Mayyar thinks that politics is a means of building relationships with the Ottomans and even the French, whilst Hamma al-Salawi believes that revolution is the only means of achieving change. The fifth character, Douja, is suspended somewhere between all these: she witnesses the transformation of Algiers helplessly and is forced to become part of this changing world. For one must live according to the city’s rules, or one must leave.

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think are more than figments of your imagination.” So I went back.

Maybe my friend was right, although I now realise that those delusions were once facts. In my despair I was easily fooled, despite the pleadings of Ibn Mayyar, and even his friend al-Sallaoui. They clung onto me like Mary Magdalene to Jesus, but rather than reassuring them, I ran away. My despair led me to abandon them, just as I abandoned what I believed.

A cold gust of wind brought me out of my reverie and I stood observing the harbour. My friend was not there. The blueness went deep into my memory and the cold pricked me like a needle. I returned to my original path, urging myself on as I turned right into a side street, then left down another. I came to the large theatre, counted off its six columns and fled it for the remaining alleyways, which I hurried down as if pursued. Past the theatre, I went down a wider street and the second turning took me into Rue Venture. As soon as I entered it, I saw the sign for the newspaper. I pronounced its name, *Le Sémaphore de Marseille*. Before lowering my eyes, a disembodied arm extended from behind the door and pulled me inside. Then it led me down the passageways to the editor’s office. The editor glanced between me and a man in his fifties seated opposite me. “It seems your old friends,” he said to me, “now they’ve run out of gold, have filled their pockets with bones!”

“Who do you mean?”

“Your officer friends, Dupond. Were you not the correspondent with the campaign that sought to turn Sparta into Athens, only for a Roman city in North Africa to take us by surprise?”

If only you were here, my friend Caviard, you would have known that I’d been right all along. But you preferred the triumph of your soul, which the years of captivity and slavery had filled with black emotions. May God illumine your soul, my friend. My silent prayer for you was interrupted when the manager said, “Do you know the steamship *La Bonne Joséphine*?”

“I might have heard of it.”

“She’s bound from Algiers, and there’s not much time before she drops anchor in the harbour. You will accompany the doctor there.” The manager threw the words in my face as he indicated the man

opposite me. Then he picked up his overcoat and left the office, leaving me to introduce myself to the doctor.

The doctor gave me a long look then spoke. "It's said the steamer is carrying human bones."

"Are they those of soldiers, who requested to be brought home?"

"No. They're for the the sugar factories'. For use as a whitener, apparently."

His words astonished me. "Are you aware of what you're saying, my good Doctor?"

"That is why I am here. All you have to do is accompany me to the harbour."

When we left the office I felt exuberant, as though I would prove to myself, or to my old friend perhaps, that the events of three years before had been a mistake. A mistake I had been trying to purge myself of by any means, even if doing so would force me to return to Algiers.

From the newspaper doorway we spotted carriages at the top of the street and ordered one to take us to the harbour, where we would wait for *La Bonne Joséphine*. As we rode over the cobblestones I went over the doctor's words. Marseille had been under a cloud of rumours for days. Then it had rained a white powder that made people feel sick. But human bones, was it credible? I only knew that I had seen the doctor's expression change, and I thought about asking him whether he really believed the rumours. I sensed his growing disquiet as we neared the harbour, and I almost suggested that the coachman stop for a few minutes, but the doctor broached the subject. "I want to convince myself not to trust these rumours, but my conscience compels me to see for myself. I am afraid to bear such a shame."

"You know that it is not our only shame. All nations have their flaws."

"For all of them I have found justifications, but what justifies the sale of the bones of another nation, and for the reason doing the rounds?"

"Money is a new god. For many reasons he tempts you to dig up graves and consume the bones of your brothers. I am certain we will find them in the steamer. Not because I am clairvoyant, but because I knew them truly and intimately."

The carriage jolted around the last bend and I tried to regain my seat. I raised my head to look out of the window and saw a few sailors wandering around. Their expressions changed whenever they looked out at the deep-blue expanse of the sea. Did they have the same opinions as a politician in Paris? The south had often caused problems, but sailors were not politicians. The sea makes you believe that some certainty exists; even if it is vague, it strikes you when you long for dry land. Politics, however, is something else, given that the only certainty you have to embrace is uncertainty. I realised that the carriage had stopped and heard the shouts of the coachman telling us to get out. I opened the door and stepped down, followed by the doctor. His eyes roved the area. All he could see was the horizon. “So *La Bonne Joséphine* hasn’t arrived yet?” I said.

He turned to me and his face adopted a more serious expression. “We’ll just have to wait then.”

An hour, perhaps more, passed. The bustle of the sailors quietened down, and a few merchants left once they had loaded their goods. Others remained, occupying the benches like us. Then the steamer appeared on the horizon. I could not tell whether it really was *La Bonne Joséphine*. I suspected it was her when I spotted them standing in another corner. Their clothing and headgear gave them away as soon as I saw them. The atmosphere of anticipation and excitement confirmed my remaining suspicions.

The doctor stood at the edge of the quay in wait for the ship. As soon as he saw it, he knew it was her. His eyes had expressed it from the beginning, while I was distracted by my pathetic analyses, as my friend Caviard called them. “Dupond, hey, Dupond, why bother yourself with those ridiculous ideas? Do you think you’ll side with these barbarians?”

Had Caviard been here, I would not have waited long with the doctor. He would have taken a bone out of his pocket, perhaps the bone of a small child or an old woman, and given it to me: “Here, take it. It’s good for carving into a cross to hang round your neck.”

And why not, Caviard? What’s the difference between my wearing a cross made of bone or my turning bones into sugar? Isn’t it the same? Whichever god you believed in, he wouldn’t be pleased. In the past,

people believed in numerous gods who fought one another. Today people believe in one god, and buy and sell people's bodies for his sake! Isn't that what you wished to say, my friend Caviard, every time we argued heatedly about your critique of the city you called Sparta. Didn't you say that you had been enslaved there and that the likes of you weren't fit to talk about it? Yes, I respect your suffering, but you don't cleanse yourself by torturing others. Suffering gives birth to knowledge, not hatred; to wisdom, not spite; to faith, not apostasy.

When the sails were lowered and the ship had cast anchor, the doctor suddenly took a few steps back. Had he predicted that the steamship he was awaiting would be well armed with cannons? Or had he guessed that it would be a ship under the merchant's flag? I saw how disappointed he was when the tremendous irony sank in as he compared the number of traders flocking in front of him with the number of soldiers onboard the ship. After a few moments he resumed watching a few of the passengers disembark. The area between him and me was soon filled with people: the petty traders of Marseille awaiting the goods *La Bonne Joséphine* had brought, and the agents of others who had sent them and continued to sit behind desks on the other side of the city.

A sailor approached, and standing next to the doctor, I steeled myself. I didn't catch the first few words of the exchange, but I saw the doctor's hand holding out a document. The sailor inspected it, then ran up the gangplank. He was gone a few minutes before signalling to us from above to follow. We went up till we reached the main deck. The sailor went a few steps ahead of us, halted suddenly, and addressed the doctor: "The Captain's cabin."

The Captain was standing at the far end of the room, his face pressed to the window. On the small table that stood between us were charts, a compass, and an enormous logbook. He turned around and stared hard at the doctor. He leafed through the document, seemingly unconvinced by its content. "The civilian prosecutor sends a doctor to inspect us. That is why you've come, isn't it?"

"It's not like that, Captain. It's an inspection that can only be carried out by a doctor. The civilian prosecutor wants to limit the scandal if the rumours are true."

The Captain was silent for a moment, then said: “You’ve come for the crates of bones?”

“Why, is there anything else onboard?” I inquired.

“You have no business apart from what’s specified. If you want to see them, that’s my condition.”

“We’re not looking for anything else,” replied the doctor.

The Captain shouted to the sailor, who immediately came into the room. I watched the captain fold up the warrant and slip it into a pocket. He asked the sailor to accompany us below deck. The doctor stepped in front of the sailor, who told him to get back behind him and led the way to the hatch leading below deck. He opened it and descended the steps, motioning for us to follow. The doctor went next, with me behind. As soon as my feet touched the floor, I caught sight of the crates, which were stacked up carelessly. The sailor remained standing by the steps behind us, while the doctor went over to the crates. He tried to open one, but large padlocks prevented him. He looked from me to the sailor at a loss. My eyes, however, were searching for any implement that might help.

The sailor only gave me a few moments, during which he disappeared behind the steps, before returning with a hammer. He went over to a crate and smashed the lock. Then he went from one lock to another, as if caught up in a game. The sea, as Caviard would say, sometimes makes its habitués prone to folly. I always remembered that madman at odd moments. I wished he were with us. Would he have been surprised by what was in the crates? What would I say to him if they were just full of animal bones? He would laugh and repeat a favourite saying of his: Dupond, you’re a good man. You remind me of an altar boy. I find it amazing that you’ve seen soldiers drowning in blood, yet you’re still such an innocent.

Caviard was always the more eloquent, but always admitted that I was the more stubborn. That’s how we left each other: both unable to change anything about his friend.

Translated by Raphael Cohen

The Russian Quarter

by
Khalil Alrez

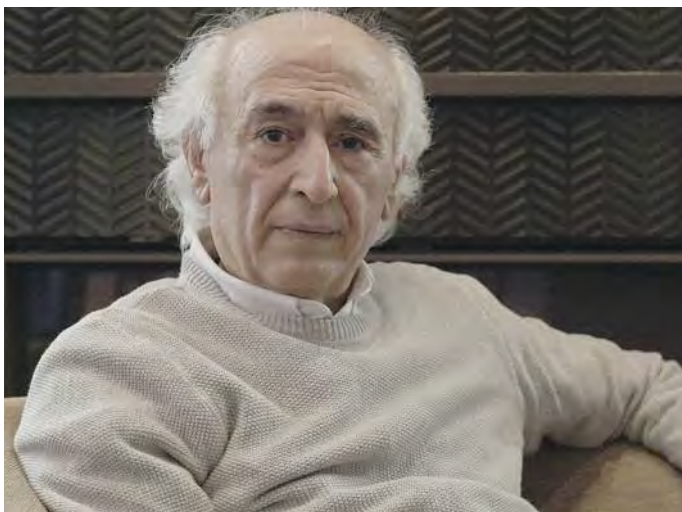


Photo: © Kheridine Mabrouk

Khalil Alrez is a Syrian novelist and translator, born in 1956. He has published one play and nine novels, including *A White Cloud in the Window of the Grandmother* (1998), *Where is Safed, Youssef?* (2008) and *In Equal Measure* (2014). His translations from Russian include Evgeny Schwartz's *Tales About Lost Time* (2004), *Selected Russian Short Stories* (2005) and *Selected Stories of Anton Chekhov* (two volumes, 2007).

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1

The Russian Quarter, the roof terrace overlooking the zoo. On a table not far from where the muzzle of the giraffe was nestling, scenes from a match replay between Spain and Uruguay were flickering across my 14-inch TV. I could hear the rumbling of artillery fire somewhere in the vicinity – it had been going since early morning – as we sat there, the giraffe and I, watching black-and-white shots of dusty old goals scored 50 years ago in Madrid. I was sipping at a cup of tea that had gone cold, my mind on the apple pastries which would soon be arriving, courtesy of Denis Petrovich, the clarinet teacher at the Music Academy. The nearby artillery guns were pounding the Ghouta district from their base inside the gardens of the Russian Quarter. But all my senses were straining toward the long flight of stairs running up to behind the settee where I was lounging, and where any moment now Nonna’s lithe footsteps might come tearing. She had popped out to the city centre to pay a visit to her dad at the Russian Cultural Centre.

The full moon was bathing me in its luminance. Images from the TV screen were flashing across the giraffe’s large black eyes, their silver light catching the thick frizz around its lips that was almost mingling with the forms of long-gone football players, long-gone spectators, and long-gone turf on the football pitch.

The amount of space allocated to the giraffe in the zoo had always struck me as disproportionately small for its size, which stood out in its sheer enormity whenever one viewed it against the backdrop of the other animals and the other parts of the zoo that surrounded it. Passers-by on the neighbouring street had grown accustomed to seeing its lofty head swaying over the wall of the enclosure and its fringe of shrubs ever since I’d taken up residence in the former room of my friend Saleh at the top of the zoo’s warehouse. Saleh had vanished from the Russian Quarter without trace a few months before the war broke out. At that point my wife had given up on me, as had my father-in-law, owing to what they saw as my numerous “defects” – a topic which this is neither the time nor the place to get into. In any event, as soon as I realised I’d ceased to be of any use or consid-

eration in my home – the formal property of my wife and her father – I lost no time in clearing out, and I left them to its exclusive enjoyment, harbouring no regrets. At the time, the place that Saleh had formerly occupied at the zoo still stood empty, so I quickly stepped in to fill it. I did so under enthusiastic encouragement from the Afghan hound President Petrovna and her owner Viktor Ivanich, an old colleague who used to work with me as a translator at the news desk of the Moscow Daily 20 years ago, and who now headed the zoo at the Russian Quarter and edited its newsletter, The Wall.

Even before we became neighbours, the giraffe and I were no strangers to each other. I had always met with a warm welcome from

About *The Russian Quarter*

The novel tells the story of a neighbourhood that for many years resists being dragged into the war going on around it, but is finally compelled to get involved. However, it enters the war with stories rather than weapons. The book's characters include a giraffe from the zoo, a poodle, a female Afghan hound and a sparrow made of wool. Its



human characters include the narrator, a translator living in the zoo in the neighbourhood's Russian quarter; Victor Ivanitch, a Russian former journalist and now manager of the zoo; Abu Ali Suleiman, French teacher and owner of a clothes shop; 'Isam, a popular hero working in a cabaret; Rashida from Morocco, former oud player in the cabaret; Arkady Kuzmitch, a little-known Russian writer; and Nuna, daughter of a clarinet player, who knits wool and lives with the narrator in the zoo.

everyone at the zoo. Whenever I approached the giraffe's pen, I flattered myself that it singled out my hand for special attention from among all the other hands that reached out to touch it through the fence. I felt it didn't shy away from me the way it usually did with Ivanova, the lady who cleaned its pen daily, and it didn't become all skittish the way it did with the vet Basheer Ghandoura who would stop by to do a check-up from time to time. When I was standing within view, I had the impression it would turn its head about and seek me out. On rare occasions, when it felt me stroking its front legs or picking the small stones out of its hooves, it would bend its head down right above my own.

This is not to say that I was oblivious to the amicable relations the giraffe enjoyed with all of its consorts, be they zoo workers, members of the administration, or fellow animals. It was as if its consciousness of towering mightily above all other entities and existents naturally disposed it to have a sense of care toward them and to treat them with affection. One of the things that always struck me in this connection was that it would sometimes take pains to lean over the fence that divided it from its neighbour, the ostrich, as if to make sure, time and time again, that no constraints should subsist between them. On some occasions it would stick out its long black tongue and it would begin rolling it gently, cautiously, and affectionately over the small patch of the ostrich's forehead, the bottom of its flat beak, and its long hairy neck, while the ostrich stared back goggle-eyed with its usual look of disbelief. As it made its way toward the edge of my roof terrace after nightfall, it would pause and look about here and there in a leisurely manner. If something happened to catch its attention, it would study it calmly and carefully. Perhaps it wanted to make sure that the sickly old wolf and his equally ancient wife were still breathing inside their small pen, that the black eagles hadn't yet collapsed from exhaustion after a whole day spent glaring at the world from their artificial crests behind the mesh screen, or that the rambunctious little lemurs were still hopping about from one artificial painted branch to another.

From among all the other animals at the zoo, it was the Afghan hound President Petrovna that had best discovered how to carve a special place for itself in the giraffe's heart. It lived with Viktor Ivanich

in a room on the roof terrace across from Saleh's, later to be my own. Almost every morning without fail, it would jump across to the terrace outside my room and it would post itself at the very edge of the roof, where it commanded an open view of the giraffe's enclosure. It would then start trying to attract the giraffe's attention by uttering a series of low gentle barks. The giraffe would quickly respond to its impassioned calls. It would sway over and with just a slight dip of its head would be standing right before it. Immediately it would lower its eyelids with their long tassels of jet-black eyelashes and surrender in blissful serenity to President Petrovna's attentions as the hound threw itself with zeal and determination into the task of working its tongue over the insides of the giraffe's flattened nostrils, its ridged forehead, its eyelids, its ears, and its stubby horns, and licking them all clean.

Nevertheless, and for mysterious reasons I can't quite establish, I felt that as time progressed, nobody in the zoo was able to compete with me for the giraffe's affection. This impression was fortified by the fact that, already from the very first night I spent in Saleh's room many moons ago, it started to make me the beneficiary of that pure form of silent listening which it afforded to none of its other acquaintances and consorts, not even the closest. It was a type of listening that for the most part wasn't aimed at understanding anything specific I happened to say. By temperament, I'm not a man of many words. From time to time I feel the urge to say something out loud, and I let the words out as the mood takes me within the giraffe's hearing, just so I'm rid of them and they don't linger pointlessly in my mouth. And sometimes in the evenings I find myself picking up a book – it might be in Arabic or in Russian – and reading a few passages out loud in front of it, or just reciting some poem to it from memory. Yet most of the time when I'm in the giraffe's presence, my mind simply drifts, without a single word escaping my lips. And even then, it continues to listen to my silence in that same limpid, devoted way. It's as if it was always communing with some secret bustle that it loved to hear, which it was able to pick up directly from my thoughts and feelings.

It was a source of great pleasure for me, naturally, to be lying there on the settee, my hand fondling the humped forehead and stubby horns of the giraffe while my attention drifted to the moon being

momentarily curtailed by a passing cloud, to a cat licking itself clean on the opposite terrace, or to a cacophony of honking suddenly erupting one street across. Around other people I'd usually start to feel awkward whenever a certain amount of time passed without my saying something. I'd never feel this kind of awkwardness around the giraffe, no matter how much time elapsed. It made me feel that I was always providing it with something to occupy its thoughts, that it found what it was looking for in me and what was worth listening to at all times.

Sometimes I would pull up a wicker chair and sit down right before its face where I could reach out and stroke the top of its mane with my hand, and where it could also listen to my thoughts turning about from up close if it pleased. To see its glistening eyes and perked-up ears, it was as though it were reading off my face some happy time gone by – tasty trees in faraway forests, a whole troop of hooved and winged associates and acquaintances whose cheerful ruckus it hadn't heard in a while. And sometimes, as in a pleasant daydream, I'd feel as if it were searching my features for signs of a calf that had dropped into the world from its lofty womb long long ago, and which it couldn't work out where and how it had managed to lose on some ill-fated day under the sweltering midday sun.

2

One day, Nonna suddenly discovered spring onions. It was as if she were seeing them for the very first time. She went ahead and bought herself a bunch.

Nonna was new to Damascus, and she hadn't yet picked up the habit of eating spring onions, not even with bread and yoghurt. But on that day Nonna realised why she'd bought that bunch, in a single flash, when she ran into me for the first time on the front steps of the Russian Cultural Centre in the old city of Damascus. I was standing there hugging a giant wad of old Russian newspapers to my chest with both arms. I'd just bought them by the kilo at the library, thinking I might use them for the zoo's newsletter *The Wall*. Nonna was making

her way past me, clutching at her bunch of spring onions with evident pride, when suddenly she caught glimpse of me and came to an immediate halt. She began devouring my face as if trying to stoke the memory of past events and faraway places. She looked as if she was about to take a step forward and throw her arms around me, newspapers and all, but at the final moment she faltered and froze to the spot. By that time her face was all red and her blossom-pink lips were quivering; so she thrust out the bunch of spring onions to me as if they were a bouquet of roses. By now, I was also ready to throw my arms around her, newspapers and all. Not because we knew each other, as we could both easily pretend we believed, but because at that difficult time, I'd found a woman like her to take an interest in me.

"Remember me?" she asked excitedly. "I'm Nonna!"

Wedging the giant wad of newspapers against my chest with one arm, I held out the other to take up the bunch of spring onions she'd offered so preciously, receiving it as if it were a bouquet of roses.

"I remember you," she pre-empted me. "Don't go away!" And without waiting for an answer she ran up the stairs and disappeared into the front door of the Russian Cultural Centre.

The truth is I felt I as if I didn't want to remember her. As I stood there with the fragrant stalks of the spring onions brushing into my face, the newspapers felt lighter in my arms, as if the stack had somehow shrunk in size. The people walking on the street around me seemed less sombre, as if there was some beautiful harmony holding them together. I didn't care whether there was or wasn't some prior event that had brought us together and through some incalculable sequence had paved the way for our unexpected intense encounter moments before. Overall, I didn't need additional reasons to interpret or justify her enthusiastic response to me, or to explain why I was now standing happily on the pavement of 29 May Street in front of the Russian Cultural Centre holding a wad of newspapers and a bouquet of spring onions.

All I cared about at that moment was that I was waiting for a beautiful woman, which every fibre of my being was crying for. As the time ticked by without a sign of her, it goes without saying that I didn't begin to doubt my senses and feelings. I continued to stand

there, hardly registering the passage of time, all my thoughts concentrated not on her absence but on her.

Then at some point I noticed a blind old man walking along tapping his stick. When he drew up alongside me he wavered for a moment, but he took another few steps before coming to a halt next to a young pine tree. A sweet smile now spread over his face, as if somewhere in the dark void behind his eyes he'd stumbled upon a dear friend standing by the tree. His stick had deftly probed the empty space in front of him and assured him he was there. I didn't wish to spoil the pleasure he was taking in his private spectacle. I made a cautious effort to alert him to the fact that I wasn't standing next to him, and that no-one else could see or was expecting to see his dear friend in the darkness enveloping him, and then I turned my eyes upward to contemplate the pure blue of the sky. That was when I felt his long stick tapping lightly against my knee, as if by accident. I turned around. His smile had broadened, and he was peering through his wizened eyelids toward the entrance of the Russian Cultural Centre where at that very moment Nonna was appearing in the door.

She was now wearing a short sleeveless dress of a golden yellow that showed off her milky-white legs and naked arms; from her shoulder hung a crimson handbag. She looked so ravishing as she gracefully swept down the stairs that I could barely bring myself to recall what she'd been wearing before she went in. She was almost breathless when she came to a halt in front of me. Her blossom-pink lips were parted and her eyes were shining with happiness as they questioned my face to discover where our first-ever steps together in the old city of Damascus would take us. I glanced around at the blind man. He was still smiling radiantly; most likely his smile was intended for us, Nonna and me. Then I was struck by the fanciful thought that his dear friend whom we couldn't see, and who was possibly still standing before him in his ink-black darkness by the side of the pine tree, was also giving us the same radiant smile. I bade them both goodbye with a short friendly nod of my head, and then I flagged down a taxi and we set off, Nonna and I, for the zoo in the Russian quarter.

Translated by Sophia Vasalou

The King of India

by
Jabbour Douaihy



Jabbour Douaihy was born in Zgharta, northern Lebanon, in 1949. He holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from the Sorbonne and is Professor of French Literature at the University of Lebanon. To date, he has published eight novels, as well as short stories and children's books. His first novel, *Autumn Equinox* (1995) won the Translation of Arabic Literature Award given by the University of Arkansas, USA. His fourth novel *June Rain* (2008) was shortlisted for the inaugural IPAF in 2008 and later published in English, French, Italian and German. He was shortlisted again for the Prize in 2012, for his fifth novel *The Vagrant*, which won the Hanna Wakim Prize for the Lebanese novel. Its French edition won the 2013 Prize awarded by the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris for the best work of fiction translated from Arabic to French. His novel *The American Quarter* (2014) reached the IPAF longlist in 2015 and was published in English.

Mahmoudiyya Orchard

On page 34 of *An Eyewitness Account of the Mount Lebanon Crisis*, a book about the calamitous events of 1860, published in Alexandria in 1892, it reads:

“People’s intentions have become corrupt, and man’s baser self now thirsts for blood in every corner of the land. The strife found its way to the village of Tel Safra, located fifteen miles east of Beirut and inhabited by Christians and Druze. Fighting broke out between the villagers, and the Christians were not known for their bravery or appetite for battle. Consequently, many were killed in al-‘Abbadiyya and on the road to Zahleh . . .”

That’s all it says. Those broad generalizations are the only published account – the only written account in fact – of the massacre that Zakariyya Mubarak’s town witnessed a century and a half ago. However, the farmers, especially the Christians among them who had suffered defeat at the time, made sure to pass down the various chapters of their struggle to their children orally, from one generation to the next. Voices from the heart of the tragedy bear witness to the sufferings of individuals, which are of little consequence to historians more interested in narrating their ‘spin’ on the events than in recording their actual details.

One of those hushed and concealed voices was that of Bahiyya al-Murad. After washing her daughter Philomena’s hair and braiding her two pigtailed, she would take her by the hand, walk her down to the overlook at the edge of the pines, and start talking. Mostly when she spoke it was as though she were talking to herself. She chose to entrust Philomena with the safekeeping of her life’s tragedy. She saw in the eyes of her eldest daughter what she did not see in the face of Philomena’s innocent younger sister Katarina. Bahiyya would start talking within earshot, and Philomena would listen. Though still at an age when the meanings of some things were difficult for her, her

mother's deep sorrow found its way into her young heart, along with that anger of hers that no amount of time could extinguish. Bahiyya told her how beautiful the old days had been, how bountiful and prosperous. They had lived a life of ease and comfort, because her father was a business partner with the Abi Nakad family in the Mahmoudiyya Orchard.

“That is what you see there before you. It extends all the way to the bottom of the valley.”

About *The King of India*

In mysterious circumstances, the body of Zakaria Mubarak is found at the boundary of his village, Tel Safra. He had just returned from a long exile in Europe, America and Africa, carrying with him a



painting by Marc Chagall, the “Blue Violinist”, a gift from his girlfriend in Paris. Suspicion falls on the cousins who may have killed him to get a treasure supposedly buried underneath the house built by their grandmother when she came back from America. This absorbing novel tells the story of Zakaria’s murder, intersected with fables of gold, sibling strife, the love of French women, the fake promise of revolution and sectarian enmities which have been flaring up from time to time in Lebanon for the last 150 years.

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He had uprooted the ancient olive trees and planted mulberry trees in their place, in order to raise silkworms. Silk production was very popular at the time, and Bahiyya was of marriageable age. Relatives and neighbours praised her beauty, so a young man from one of the nearby villages came on two occasions to their house for evening gatherings. He was a zajal poet-singer who wore a striped vest and red keffiyeh made of pure silk: a gallant, well-mannered man. He waited for her a few days later on the road to the village bakery just so he could walk a few short steps with her and tell her in all seriousness and brevity that if she did not accept his marriage proposal then he would enter the order of the Mariamite monks. Her heart would start pounding whenever she caught sight of him in town or at Mahmoudiyya Orchard where he worked with her father during silkworm season and otherwise learned the tailoring trade the rest of the year. She persuaded her mother, who consulted with her father, and he in turn consented. Everyone agreed to have the wedding on the Feast Day of Saints Peter and Paul. Bahiyya started counting the days as she prepared a trousseau of her own handiwork. But early in May, the townspeople were drawn out from their homes by sounds of shouting and clamour outside. Some peasants were carrying the body of a young man from the town who had been murdered along the cobblestone road to Damascus. He had been travelling with three government soldiers who didn't raise a finger to stop the Druze from beating him with sticks and stoning him to death. The townspeople prayed over him and buried him. A delegation of the town's Druze community came the next day to condemn the incident and declare they had nothing to do with it. They made an agreement with the Christians not to fight with each other and that whosoever was bent on causing problems should go join the rest of his faction outside Tel Safra. Tensions were defused. People went back to their work, and Bahiyya busied herself once again with preparations for her wedding day, until the news of Sheikh Abu Saeed Hamdan came along. He was one of Tel Safra's socialites, and a powerful and influential man. He'd fallen prey to an ambush set up for him by the Christians in the Hammana district. It was said that they tortured him before killing

him and that one of his assailants was a young man from Tel Safra who wasn't heard from afterwards, nor were his whereabouts ever known again. The Druze did not react immediately but waited until their messengers got the word to their relatives and supporters in the neighbouring villages. They assembled outside the town in the morning before the church bells for the First Mass rang out, attacked the Christian quarter and began burning the houses and property. Nayfeh, the sister of Sheikh Abu Saeed, marched at the front of the line, singing war songs that called for revenge.

Bahiyya went outside barefoot, worried about her father and fiancé who had set out for the orchard at dawn. Three or four of the Druze were mounted on horses while the rest were charging on foot. She raced ahead of them to the orchard and tried to face them off. "We have never fought with you!" she shouted. "We want peace. Let us be!" But one of the mounted men charged right at her on his horse and nearly trampled her, causing her to fall down on the side of the road. Her father and fiancé refused to flee like the other Christians, who were not in the habit of aiding each other as they were scattered and lacked leadership. The moment they got within the crosshairs of the Druze's rifles, they were shot at from multiple directions. They had no chance of survival. They fell in the middle of the mulberry orchard, while all their assailants disappeared in the blink of an eye.

Whenever Bahiyya reached this part of her story, she would stop walking, in order to let her beating heart quieten down so she could bring back the scene and hold it steady in her mind. She would finish the story, hugging her daughter to her chest.

"I was left all alone with my father and my fiancé in the mulberry orchard. The breeze from the sea was cold that morning. The first time I ever kissed my fiancé he was lying dead on the ground. Completely unarmed, he stood to face them, refusing to leave my father all alone. I embraced my father who had never once in his life embraced me. My mother used to say I was his favourite. He wouldn't sleep all night if I had the slightest fever, but he was embarrassed to hug me. I started crawling on my knees and clutching at the soil. I thought I was going to die, too. In fact, I wished I would die. I started rubbing my face in

the mud. I rolled my father onto his back, with his face looking up to the sky. I did the same with my fiancé. I clasped their hands across their chests to be as I imagined the angels were in heaven. I prepared a spot on the ground between them and lay down on my back like them. I remember hearing the chirping of birds before falling unconscious. They got to us around noon. They picked me up and sat me in the shade of a tree. My mouth was full of mud. I didn't see my father or my fiancé. I didn't know where they had taken them. I tried to weep, but the tears burned in my eyes."

French soldiers came to shore from their warships off the Lebanese coast, and life returned to normal in Tel Safra. Bahiyya al-Murad remained inconsolable. Her mother thought she might go mad and that the only cure was marriage. They married her off while she was practically unable to speak, to a poor young man who in less than two years' time gave her Philomena and Katarina before falling into Hajal Valley where they discovered his body two days later. The mule whose back he had fallen from led them to his corpse after wandering in the streets weighted down with the sacks of flour he was carrying. People said that Bahiyya al-Murad did not weep for her husband because she simply could not mourn any more. They didn't even dress her in black, out of fear for her life. It was also said that someone had 'written' a spell on her, and there were stories about a woman of Turkoman origin who'd married into the town and was envious of Bahiyya's beauty. It was as though whoever had 'written' a spell on her had done the same to her daughter Philomena, who resembled her with her pretty figure and big eyes.

Their lot in life was beauty and bad luck. However, where Bahiyya had succumbed to her grief, Philomena fought against her fate and ultimately defeated it. She too fell in love with a young man who did not possess many worldly belongings. In winter, he was asked to clean and prune the trees, and at the start of spring to graft the cherry and apple trees. He pocketed a small income with which he could support himself and his wife. One day a representative from the Abi Nakad family came to ask him to clean up and till the orchard. However, Philomena, whose mother's terror-stricken voice had made its

impression on her, begged him not to do it and not to go near Mahmoudiyya Orchard. She offered to compensate him with her small savings and what she could get from selling her two gold bracelets that had belonged to her mother.

Mahmoudiyya Orchard has been known for a strange story that persists even in our current times. It started with the murder of Philomena's grandfather and her mother's fiancé. They had been buried secretly at the bottom of the orchard, because getting to the Christian cemetery in town had been impossible at the time due to the presence of armed Druze in that direction. In fact, the matter had been concealed even from Bahiyya, who had always assumed they had been laid to rest up in the cemetery.

The authorities punished the Nakad elders for their participation in the attacks and murders. They confiscated their properties, including Mahmoudiyya Orchard, which encompassed over a hundred dunums. It was left neglected, and for years, no one went near it, until the High Authority of the Mount Lebanon district decreed that personal properties be returned to their owners, until work was underway to restore them via partnership contracts. The orchard had withered, and the nearby silk factory had been shut down, so the only solution was uproot the mulberry trees and sell them as cheap firewood. Following that came a mugharasa contract, whereby the lessee earns half ownership once it turns a profit. It was a fifteen-year contract signed by the heirs of Salman Abi Nakad and a Christian partner who began planting various types of fast-growing trees, while his workers looked after irrigation and cultivation. He promised himself to start reaping a harvest in three years. During the long-awaited spring season, a hot khamsin wind – never known before in those parts – blew in. They said that it had come all the way from the distant Libyan desert. All the blossoms shrivelled up and the fruits and branches became worm-infested, causing them to turn black and wither. In less than a week's time it destroyed years of constant work and tireless effort. All the townspeople came to observe the disaster with their own eyes, the likes of which they had never seen in their lives and for which they could not fathom a cause. The murabi' – quarter-partner – complained

about his situation to the Abi Nakad family who sympathized with him. They reclaimed the orchard from him without making him pay a penalty for breach of contract. History repeated itself a few years later. Bahiyya looked up into the heavens and muttered, "How great you are, Oh God!" Then along came another partner, convinced that the problem wasn't with the land but rather with his predecessor who hadn't been good at caring for it or cultivating it. He planted Mahmoudiyya with grapevines and watched over them night and day, nurturing, irrigating and pruning them, until a cold snap hit along with heavy rain, followed by a morning freeze that burned the tender shoots of the mirwah and 'abeedi grapes, dashing all the second partner's hopes. After that, the Abi Nakad family couldn't find anyone to make the land profitable for them, neither as a murabi' quarter-partner lessee nor as a mugharis half-partner lessee. They neglected it and it became overrun with brush. Snakes and moles and wild mulberry bushes, whose fruit people were afraid to eat, multiplied and resulted in parents warning their children not to go near it.

During that time, Philomena's husband Masoud Mubarak decided to flee. He donned his clean black striped sirwal pants, white shirt, and his tall boots – the only thing of value he had inherited from his father – and walked off with the clippers in his pocket as if on his way to prune trees at one of the orchards. He set out and all trace of him was lost forever. He had been silent about it and hadn't divulged the secret of his sudden departure to anyone. It didn't take Philomena's mother Bahiyya al-Murad long to follow the departed ones. In her final years, she lost her ability to speak, causing her to sink deep inside herself, and she never come back out. She died just a few days before the birth of her grandson Gabriel.

Philomena realized that if she stayed amidst her broken family there was no power in heaven that could help them. Alternatively, if she did stay near her husband's relatives, who had not shown much concern for her situation, she would find neither sustenance in life nor the least bit of joy. One morning, while she watched her son crawling around on his knees and trying to get her attention so he could grab onto her and stand up on his feet, she decided to fight the death that was

on her trail and cast off the heavy burden of grief from her shoulders. Without actually looking out towards the sea, which was hidden from view at the time by a thick white morning haze, she knew her only option was to go far away. It was common in those days for people to travel to America, even for women to go on their own. And so, she went.

During her absence, the Great War took place. There were shortages and people were poverty-stricken. They were terrified by stories that came from the north, from towns in Byblos and Batroun, of people dying of starvation. Mahmoudiyya Orchard was still overrun with brush, not bearing a single fruit. So, the townsfolk banded together in the fall to plough and plant it with wheat in the hope it would provide enough bread to sustain them. Katarina alone – who raised her sister Philomena’s son Gabriel as one of her own children – knew that nothing planted in Mahmoudiyya would grow, because blood is heavy, and because there is divine justice in the world. And indeed, when the wheat stalks grew and the green of the sprouting spring carpeted the entire vast area, they started hearing news of locusts storming over the slopes of Mount Lebanon. It didn’t take long before they arrived and covered the sky, blotting out the sunlight. They devoured everything in sight in a matter of a day or two. Mahmoudiyya reverted once again to an arid orchard. Many Druze fled to their relatives in the Hauran region, and the Christians tried to manage despite the shortages and the spread of typhus.

The owners of Mahmoudiyya Orchard gave up all hope for it after the war ended and they were unable to find anyone to partner with them in developing it. Its reputation spread to the neighbouring villages, and all sorts of stories were concocted about the land being tainted and how it had been the object of the wrath of Astarte, the goddess in whose honour the Roman temple had been constructed.

Translated by Paula Haydar

Firewood of Sarajevo

by
Said Khatibi



Said Khatibi is an Algerian novelist, born in 1984. He studied in Algeria and France, graduating with a BA in French Literature from the University of Algiers and an MA in Cultural Studies from the Sorbonne. He has worked in journalism since 2006 and lives in Slovenia. His published works include: *The Orbit of Absence* (a translation into French of Algerian stories, 2009), *Book of Sins* (a novel, 2013), *Flaming Gardens of the East* (a book about travels in the Balkans, 2015), *Forty Years Waiting for Isabel* (a novel, 2016) and the IPAF shortlisted novel *Firewood of Sarajevo* (2018).

The genie's eyes

In this trembling, apprehensive city, one catastrophe begets another. All at once disasters emerge from their hiding places to fall on our heads and shatter them. The embassy had refused my application for a visa for Slovenia and the following day, I woke up with no job and no income. A lost and broken object of anger, not knowing where to turn my face.

After the publication of an interview with a member of the political opposition living in London came the catastrophic decision, banning the publication of the paper. The order wasn't sent to the chief editor or the publications manager but instead to the printing house, where we were informed by an employee that an order had been issued by the Ministry of Communications withdrawing the newspaper's licence without telling us the reason. We only had to think for a bit to conclude that the reason for the decision must have been the interview.

"I'm just following orders," the employee told us.

"And I'm unemployed," I told Malika.

"I'll employ you as my personal guard and pay you a salary each month!" she replied sarcastically.

Her sarcasm struck me as misplaced. I was in deep shit and she was joking like a schoolgirl trying to set my mind at rest, though her intentions were innocent. She wanted to make a joke of it to change my mood and relieve me of my nervous tension, that's all. Her intuitions had been right. When I told her on the telephone I'd been assigned to an investigation in the village of Sidi Labka, she replied coldly: "You're giving yourself trouble, you won't achieve anything!" I was cross at her reply at the time, but later I understood what she had meant. Sometimes I had a strange feeling about Malika. I could detect in her the smell of motherhood that a man looks for who has lost his own mother before he's been weaned from his dependence on her. After Hajja Fatima's body had grown thin and she had lost her

appetite, she suffered from continuous vomiting. As the cancer sapped her spirits, I looked for her smell in one of my aunts without success. I couldn't find it in any other woman I had met before, apart from Malika, in whom I could sense a lost warmth, a light leading me back to the woman whose presence I needed.

With my tall stature, light skin, and calm features, I looked like a younger brother of Malika – whose brow had become covered in light wrinkles – rather than her personal bodyguard.

“Why don't you go to another newspaper?”

“Advertising revenues have dried up, and with them employment opportunities.”

The year I was orphaned, after I'd got my degree in media studies, I got a position on *al-Hurr* newspaper. For the first three months I worked as an editor on the 'Correspondents' page'. I took over from a female editor in her thirties, who had gone on maternity leave then resigned to live with her husband and young child in a coastal town in the east of the country. Every day I would receive dozens of faxes and phone calls from young correspondents about routine and sometimes unimportant news items. News to fill a couple of pages about the repair of the pavements in some out-of-the-way village; a forestation drive in another village; a citizen looking for some lost medicine; someone else with some money who had given a donation to build a mosque; a Christian graveyard whose graves had been desecrated; dogs forming packs behind a school and terrorising the pupils. Assorted new items, sometimes not even worth a mention, which I would re-read, re-edit, choose headlines for them, then send them to be typeset and published the following day. After three months had passed, the chief editor transferred me to the cultural department, where I met Fathi. We became friends and he awoke in me a passion for writing and literature. I started to undertake some assignments outside the office, covering events on location. Sometimes the paper would receive new books, in Arabic or French, which I would look at with Fathi, discuss their contents and the lives of their authors, and I would write reviews of them. But I only stayed in the cultural department a year and four months. The manager decided to scrap the cultural page

and replace it with a page of jokes and crossword puzzles, which changed during Ramadan into a recipes page. So I moved with Fathi to the politics department. I found myself writing about death and the dead – the monster that was lying in wait for us – and about the pronouncements of state officials with broad faces and thick moustaches, whose names and faces I knew, but had never ever met any of them. From time to time I would be charged with investigating places where blood had been shed, either in the capital, Algiers, or elsewhere.

About *Firewood of Sarajevo*

In *Firewood of Sarajevo*, Said Khatibi compares and contrasts the sad destinies of two countries. At one time tied by bonds of friendship and ideology, both have become embroiled in futile civil wars, descending into hell and reaching a state where pain is the only common denominator uniting people. In Algeria, as in Bosnia Herzegovina,

the twentieth century had a bloody end as people were torn apart by issues of religion and ethnicity.

The novel's protagonists, Salim and Ivana, both fled destructive war and hatred in their countries, and went on to build a new lives in Slovenia. Through them, the ugliness of conflict between brothers belonging to the same land is exposed, now brothers only in pain. Even in exile, the smell of war lingers in their nostrils and its effects are felt in their everyday lives.



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Translation Rights: the publisher

“You’re a bachelor, the only one who can be entrusted with this,” the chief editor commented on one occasion.

I was given those jobs because all my colleagues were married with children, and people were afraid for them, but I was also afraid for myself. It’s true that I had lost my mother, and my father – who’d developed Alzheimer’s – was becoming more distant from me, but I wasn’t ready to lose my life for the sake of people I didn’t know. I had sympathy for them, but none of them would have any sympathy for me if I died because of my eagerness to write about what was happening to them.

“It’s water under the bridge,” said Malika, trying to reassure me.

I looked into her brightly coloured eyes, blue with brown, and said to myself that perhaps she had been struck by a genie while she was still in her mother’s womb. Perhaps she herself was a genie, an ill-fated woman, and I didn’t know it. I lowered my eyes to her lips, which she was constantly moistening with her tongue. I waited for her to smile and reveal her white teeth but she refused and went back to her jokes.

“If you’d accept a job as my personal bodyguard, I’d pay you the same and look for a suitable wife for you.”

I brought a bottle of cold water from the fridge, went back over to her and asked: “Won’t you be going to visit your family?”

“I don’t want to visit them, and have to confront their repeated questions about my private life. Huriyya visited them and told me that my aunt wants to marry me off to one of her sons! Imagine!”

“Why not?”

“I’m not the sort of person who wants to marry a relative!”

“If you continue to refuse, you’ll never marry at all!”

She fell silent for a moment then gave me a look full of anger. “What’s that got to do with you?” she suddenly asked me. “You rascal,” I muttered. The signs of joking disappeared from her face and her eyes became bright as cherries.

“Have the ‘guardians of the soul’ started corresponding with you again?”

I expected her to answer no – I had put the question just to relieve the atmosphere.

“Who will guarantee that they won’t do it again?”

Once they sent a former female colleague on *al-Hurr* newspaper a piece of white cloth like a shroud, with some soap, and wrote on a small piece of paper: “If you come back, we will come back.” What if they get to me, and threaten me, I asked myself. I could find no answer. I was consumed by fear for a whole day, secretly praying that God would spare me anything like that.

Malika and I hid ourselves away in a corner of her small room, arranged as befitted a faithful reader of John Steinbeck, Anais Nin and Ernest Hemingway. Everything was clean and in the right place: window curtains, covers, a bed, two wooden chairs and a small desk, crammed full of novels by her favourite American authors. We sat opposite each other, saying nothing. The silence was broken only by the voice of Cheb Khaled coming from the tape recorder. When he burst out into his old songs, we felt that the earth had stopped turning.

*If you find my love combing her locks, cover me with her hair
If you find my love crying, quench my thirst with her tears
If you find my love dead, bury me opposite her.*

As Khaled sang, Malika closed her brightly coloured eyes and rested her cheek on the palm of her left hand. She got up from her chair and, with her bottom on the floor, leaned her back against the bed then pushed back a stray hair behind her ear. She sighed as though she wanted to say something but left Khaled’s voice to speak for her.

Khaled Hadj Ibrahim, to give him his full name, was the salt of the desert, the spring of travellers, and our national memory. Intentionally or otherwise, the dark man from Oran spoke to me, describing me in his songs better than I could describe myself. In these bloodthirsty times, people’s voices turned to tears and lamentation, except for that of Khaled, who spoke of love and freedom. The ‘negro’, as the inhabitants of Oran called him, knew how to play on the hearts of his listeners. I saw him on television some time ago, singing with his eyes shut, standing in front of the microphone like an obedient soldier, with a radiant smile, and an untidy moustache that was quite unique. A

certain writer said that a man without a moustache was like a woman with a moustache. Did this mean that I was not a complete man? Would Malika really like to see me with a moustache but was hiding her wishes from me? Malika had never commented on my appearance but she loved Cheb Khaled, and Khaled did not trim his moustache. Perhaps she liked to make me listen to her favourite singer to convey to me a message she was unable to express openly.

*I don't care what people say about me
God willing, I will always be okay
Those who gossip about me
Take my faults from me
I believe in fate
And will accept my destiny
I don't like to worry
I don't care about gossip
It's in my nature to hate scoundrels
I aspire only to God*

Khaled carried on singing, as Malika passed her right hand gently over her hair, which had grown long. She had dyed it black, like Isabelle Adjani's hair in the film *One Deadly Summer*. Had she dyed her hair for me? To gain my attention? But I didn't say a word or praise her beauty. I swear that I am no romantic, and incompatible with romantic women. I continued to stare into her face, licking my lips just as she did and listening to the sound of the Rai coming from the tape recorder, ascending to a heaven that was more merciful than the earth we lived on. As she looked away from me, I felt confused: Should I embrace her? Stop the music and talk to her? I sat on the ground beside her and put my arm around her waist, waiting for a suitable moment to take her lips by storm.

Malika didn't buy records or cassette tapes and avoided going into shops that sold them, for fear of rousing suspicion, so she said. She also avoided going to the women's baths on Fridays, or to the hairdresser's. Instead, she got a friend of hers to style her hair or dye it from time

to time, and recorded both old and new songs from the radio, which broadcast evening concerts on Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays. By night, she danced with the living, while by day she had mercy on the dead.

When Huriyya came into the house, we got up, Malika switched off the tape recorder. I regretted that I had wasted the opportunity to flirt with her. We left the room to greet Huriyya, and she slipped her veil down so that her blond-dyed hair could be seen, tied in a ponytail, like Steffi Graf's. Then she kissed me on the cheek. I was on the point of leaving when Malika tried to persuade me to stay and have supper with them, but I insisted on going back to my apartment.

"Imagine if the 'guardians of the soul' were to visit us at night and found me with you, with no family connection between us!" I whispered to her, jokingly.

"I guarantee we'd die together and you wouldn't deceive me with another woman!"

I went back to the open books scattered around my apartment, to my clothes and the other things lying all around the place. I looked at them with a feeling of disappointment in my heart. I wasn't the same person I had been before. I was an unlucky man. Fate was against me and I hadn't got a visa to travel. I was unemployed, an out-of-work journalist. My staying in the building was a matter of time, nothing more. I might not be able to save enough money to make another advance payment.

My mood changed and I lost my appetite. Faruq contacted me to ask how I was and I told him that the embassy had refused my application for a visa. He encouraged me to try again. I wanted to tell him that I was unemployed and that the paper had stopped publication, but I hesitated. He would find some reason to criticise me again, for neither he nor al-Hajj were happy with my choice of job as a journalist, and I think that Si Ahmad was also unhappy with my decision. My aunts, Zuleikha, Sa'diya and Sharifa, said nothing, and had no view on what happened to their nephew. After I had finished university, al-Hajj suggested to me that I should go to the desert to work in a petroleum company, through the good offices of

a friend of his, but I refused. He and Faruq considered my decision to be illogical, and thought that I wasn't looking after my interests. If Faruq found out what had happened at the paper, he would be like a broken record, insisting he understood my interests better than I did. Sometimes Faruq treated me like a juvenile, as if I were his son. There were only five years between us but he wanted to impose his advice on me, like those scout leaders who arouse revulsion in those who consult them, because of the severity of their advice.

"I'll submit another application for the visa!" I said, without much conviction, then put the phone down.

I turned on the radio, brushing away the flies with the palms of my hands. The insecticide had been useless. I heard the announcer mutter something about Widad Tilmisan's team, who had won the Republic Cup, then changed stations to the French-language channel, where I heard the announcer speaking about the anniversary of the Soummam Conference. He talked about it as a pivotal event in the history of the state and the War of Liberation. 'The Soummam Conference was a compass that changed the history of Algeria', said the announcer in a tone of triumph. If only the martyrs could return and see where the compass has led us. I changed the channel to a Moroccan station playing Egyptian and Lebanese songs and stretched out on the bed like a debilitated dog, stinking of sweat. I shut my eyes, and across my mind there floated the pale faces of my colleagues, frowning and gloomy after they'd learned of the decision to cease production of the newspaper. I decided that I would go the following day to a popular café in Martyrs' Square, on Fathi's advice, to meet an 'agent', and negotiate with him for a forged visa. Getting out of a counterfeit country like this, where I no longer had a job, needed serious, resolute forgery.

Translated by Paul Starkey

The Tank

by
Alia Mamdouh



Photo: © Kheiridine Mabrouk

Alia Mamdouh is an Iraqi writer and novelist, born in 1944. She studied Psychology and graduated from Mustansiriyah University, Baghdad, in 1971. For more than ten years, she edited the weekly Baghdad paper *Al-Rasid*. After leaving Baghdad in 1982, she lived in various cities. In 1973, Mamdouh published a short story collection entitled *Overture for Laughter* and this was followed by eight novels, some of which have been translated into English, French, Italian and Spanish. Her most well-known novel is *Naphtalene* (1986), first published in English translation in the UK under the title *Mothballs* (Garnet, 1996), and translated into eight other languages and taught to students at the Sorbonne University for two years.

Mr. Samim, family name unknown

As in old picture albums, we all thought: We, The undersigned, are the family of Ayyoub Al- who will gradually appear with us here before long, either directly in front of us, or a bit to one side. It would be best to leave the mother, Makkiya, seated on a chair, since she can't stand up for long even if it's just to get a picture taken. Next to her is Aunt Fathiya, then the younger aunt, Saniya. The grandmother, Bibi Fatim, isn't among us, since she stayed upstairs. Now, in order for us to be properly dignified, it's preferable that we men – including me, father Ayyoub and my brother Mukhtar – stand behind them. Here it would be advisable for us to leave a place for Hilal, our oldest son, and for her – our daughter Afaf – whose case we've entrusted to Mr. Samim. Come on, brother, take the task off my hands, and let me go back to my place in the album.

Well, Miss Afaf's ghost appeared just as I was writing your name.

Dear Doctor Carl Valino,

I am Samim, a secret writer and I operate under a code name. I'm the man who came with her in 1986 to your private clinic on Rue de Jasmin in the Sixteenth Arrondissement. I hope your memory doesn't fail you. As for her, Miss Afaf, she was leading the way with her short, slender frame. In her hand she held a square painting she had done, which she presented to you without a word. My wife Tarab, the sculptor, was her friend and colleague at the Academy.

Ma'ath Alousi, my friend and Miss Afaf's engineering advisor, is the architect whose initial design of 'the cube' Miss Afaf was so taken with that she enrolled in the Faculty of Engineering, and studied there for two years before changing her major and transferring to the Academy of Fine Arts in Wazireya. Ma'ath may have 'corrupted' her when he said to her one day: "We'll design 'the cube' together, and we'll invite our favourite people to view it."

Perhaps based on the course of that cube and fine arts in general, and the context of our whole city, it was Miss Afaf – and I insist on using this prefix to her name at present, setting aside nostalgia or anything close to it – who was always the first topic of conversation.

Then there's the lawyer, her uncle Mukhtar, who may provide us with some legal rationale and administrative advice so that we might find some consolation in the archives.

And her brother Hilal, whom we continue to write letters to, urging him to act quickly, but which he has yet to reply to. Who knows? Maybe, during the final hours before the curtain closes on the last of our faces, he may show up and be part of this manuscript, or whatever you want to call it. Ma'ath says that Younus's smile has changed of late. It's become perplexing. He asked him if he'd been thinking of joining

About *The Tank*



The novel explores the relationship between human beings and the places which have been taken away from them. After four decades of exile, the writer imagines her return to Iraq and begins her journey of observing the huge changes experienced by the country and society. It is a literary return with a tragic undertone, and interwoven with the text is the life of the writer who has shared with her characters the upheavals which have shaken her homeland.

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us, since he could report on what's been going on inside him. Ma'ath added: "These entries will take on special importance, even if it doesn't happen right away. If we knew the address of Mr Yassin, we would send for him and make him join us . . . We would also provide you with some footnotes and additions, and things we don't have a title for. Our letters might draw in Aunt Fathiya, and she might speak out . . . We'll manage the situation, our situation. And, wise sir, you for your part will go from monopolising some, or all, of the truth, to sharing it with us – the family members that you expect to look for her before it's too late. You'll be required to certify everything that you know and find out, what you've heard, and what has come to your attention, whether by coincidence or design, so that you can confirm the perpetrator, whether you, or us. Every one of us references their stories to her trail, wary of disturbing their certainty of a deceptive innocence. Of course, we know about some eras and what they achieved and engraved in us. They're going to expose both us and you to criticisms on all fronts, and from every direction. They'll cause us to start betraying principles in a case, or cases, of tentative or final elaboration of all the facts, both confidential and public . . . You will observe this, sir, all of our tracks, as we surprise ourselves even more than we do you. After all, we would have preferred that the secrets remain between us. But now, we'll face hardship and some danger, each of us in his own way, as we place them in both your hands and our own: those that remain in our hands, and on our clothes. Before anything else, we thought this might be the only way we could regain contact with her or get her back in person, that is, if we implicate each other on account of our legal, linguistic, intellectual, religious, artistic, sexual and political records. We thought that if we recovered ourselves, we who are on the verge of drowning, then some day she might dream, just as we do, of herself unexpectedly appearing before us. Ahh . . . How often we've thought of keeping certain secrets hidden, and disclosing others. Each one of us has to act according to the dictates of his own circumstances.

Ma'ath assigned me the task of recording this manuscript.

He told me encouragingly: "You have clear, bold handwriting, and your letters are fully formed. This will make it easy to read and trans-

late. I'll supply you with scraps of paper to work from, either typed, or in my own lousy handwriting.”

And Tarab!

She's still hesitant. She has reservations about letting all the secrets out. She said: “Some of us make them up and weigh ourselves down with them in order to come across as high class. And some transport them to the world of art and literature, where they take unexpected paths.”

It was Uncle Mukhtar who supported our efforts in that nonchalant way of his, which Miss Afaf liked so much that she brought him on board with us. He isn't the conversationalist that he needs to be and he's usually drunk, the way she likes to see him. So if he works with new tools, he won't feel any inhibitions. On the contrary, he'll overcome his stutter and the parallel account he narrates about her will start to get ahead of ours. The Ayyoub Al- family may not take to all these types of narrative tracks, since this might block the steps required to search for her. On the other hand, it might have the opposite effect. We don't know, Doctor. But there's one thing the family wants in a hurry, as it hangs over all of our heads. Come on, start telling the story right now. Look for our daughter. The time since she went missing can't be compared to the natural cycles of childhood and youth, or to periods of lasting health or imagined illness. Come on. Sing like her, or whisper like her so that the echo can sound, all the way to the ill-omened lands of westerners that led our daughter astray. Come on – move to the same place. There . . . have you begun to see her? That's our daughter herself, or nothing but a character inside the pages of a book that you intend to write but that doesn't lead you to her. Don't ask questions you'll never find the answers to, since all you have are words and dry paint on a handful of canvases that have been lost among her friends. But all of us are evidence of one sort or another, are we not? Good. And as nobody would suspect us, don't avoid taking us into consideration. Scrutinize us. Come and talk with us. Scrutinise yourselves too, or others. We don't know your plans. Are you going to open a police-like report, or will you content yourselves with an announcement? Is she gone for good? Why do you

go to other people's lands? Huh? It's nothing but a pain in the head, in her head, that's playing the murderer. This isn't a legal problem as her uncle Mukhtar keeps saying, but we, her family, disagree over what to call it: Is it a crime? Or a general state of panic that's making the rounds of the world's continents and capital cities? We didn't see a drop of blood on our daughter's clothes as she disappeared from sight. We didn't see that. Oh! She's so far away from us now. Yes she is, yes she is. The lines and roads that might lead to her have been blocked for a long time, and not just because of wars.

We miss her, and we don't know what to do with the longing, or how to manage it amongst ourselves. We don't know where to put it, or how to spread it around. Did some of us get a bigger share of it than others? Can we put it off, or hurry it up so as to get over it all at once? But it was sucking up half our lifetimes, so we don't know where the years went, or how they passed.

The foreign doctor may be in good health, and his heart may have stopped pining. We don't know why. Maybe that's the reason he's busy earning his living, and you all are like him. You said, "Missing her doesn't do any good," and then you relaxed and felt better. True, longing is an obnoxious thing, and your doctor doesn't bother to look for the right diagnosis for it. True, it has no entry in any medical textbook. Even so, it's a deadly disease, and it's the only chance we have left to put some warmth back into our blood.

Come on now, tell me: What have you been doing with all those pencils, papers, cups and drinks when our daughter has been gone for so long, Mr. Samim? What are we going to do with all these caravans of bitterness when the road to her is unsafe, when parts of it are blocked, and when everyone knows the reasons? We aren't going to be able to hold onto our daughter when we don't even know how old she is now. Every day our longing grows more intense, and weighs more heavily on us than it did the day before. We also don't know how to distract ourselves from these things, or with whom.

How does there come to be this inseparable link between disappearance, longings, roadblocks, and wars? I thought you all knew the reason, and that you would be able to tell us. Hah . . . you're looking

here. The roads that lead to her are closed, and there's no hope of healing there. So then, who's going to look for her? It won't do to manipulate us or exploit us, or to flatter the westerners and play the hypocrite. So long as you carry on in your lazy way, even if you moved and took all the references and volumes, working until your eyes couldn't see any more, we would never find any trace of her. That way won't bring her back to us, or to you. Don't you realize that she left you before the streets were closed! She left Tarab, and Younus, and Yassin, and you, Mr. Samim, and that engineer who considered her his confidante. In the end, she developed an aversion to him and took his secrets with her.

And we the aunts: Yes, I'm Aunt Fathiya. I got sicker and sicker as I formulated the simple sentences she loved in hopes of her coming back. I started talking to her every day, calling out to her in the way stories usually begin and the way we want them to. We could stop the girl right here, bringing the camera up close to every face in the family. Remind me, Mr. Samim, whether I've forgotten one of us. Your doctor will give a faint smile, since she was the youngest in the family when we moved to Tank Street. Yes, I'm the one who divided her name in two. Whenever I looked up and saw her in front of me, I would say:

"Affou, clean the table really well. Some society lady might drop by. The neighbours around here aren't like the people on the ship. I checked both ordinary folks and the elite, and wrote everything down in my diary, darling."

As soon we'd settled into our new home, I took her by the hand and said to her: "Come out for a walk with me. Let's check out the streets, the houses and the amazing mansions around here. Store in your head the colours of the sky, the feel of the ground, and the scent of the bitter oranges as they burst open on the tree. Take it all in with your nostrils, Affou. Then sit down and color and draw."

It's true, Mr. Samim, that Affou wouldn't answer when I called. So I would repeat myself, more loudly than before, and as a way of teasing her, I'd draw out her name a bit, like this: "Affouooooo . . . !"

But she wouldn't respond, since she knew what I wanted. I'd talk to

myself with her standing behind me, saying, “Come on, sweetie pie, draw pictures of all of them. I have them ready for you so that you can see what they looked like and what they were wearing, with their King Faisal I-style sidara hats, their tarboosh and their turbans. Come now, I want to see them decked out in full regalia. Make their shoes as shiny as their bald heads, make their suits look brand new as though they’d just come from the tailor’s shop, and their collars snow-white. Now, sweetheart, what would you think about putting on an exhibition for the Iraqi ministers? See? I took the illustrations from the book that shows the members of the Iraqi Cabinets and I had them enlarged at the Sabah bookstore at the beginning of Ishreen Street. See how chic they are, and what good taste they had! Here’s Prime Minister Abdel Muhsin Saadoun with his sidara and bowtie. You know, Affou, they were all so well groomed, I could smell cologne wafting off their clothes and their moustaches. Heh heh! Back in those days, they had nice customs related to eating and dressing. They also had certain ways of holding their hands and posing for the photographer when he came to take their pictures. They were real gentlemen.”

She would grow quiet when I called her by her nickname. It bothered her, and she would clam up. Was I the only one who didn’t know it upset her? Did my use of the diminutive make her feel diminished somehow? That’s the kind of misunderstanding that ruins relationships, maybe even for generations. I thought it was a way of showing affection or approval. Don’t you agree, Mr. Samim? One day I stood her up in front of me and explained it to her.

I said: “Don’t believe them. Your mother had wanted to name you Afifa after our mother. But your father, a man of refined taste, settled the matter. ‘No,’ he said, Afaf is prettier.”

Translated by Nancy Roberts

Fardeqan – the Detention of the Great Sheikh

by
Youssef Ziedan



Photo: © Samuel Shimon

Youssef Ziedan is an Egyptian novelist, born in 1958. He is a scholar specialising in Arabic and Islamic studies and author of more than sixty books. His works have won numerous international prizes. His most famous novel, *Azazeel* (2008) won the 2009 International Prize for Arabic Fiction and was translated into 16 languages. Its English edition won the 2012 Anobii First Book Award, given by the Edinburgh Festival for the best novel translated for the first time into English, and the 2013 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation. He has published six further novels in Arabic: *The Shadow of the Serpent* (2008), *The Nabatean* (2010), *Muhal* (2012), *Guantanamo* (2014), *Nur* (2016) and *Fardeqan – the Detention of the Great Sheikh* (2018).

Ibn Sina downed his drink in one gulp and toyed with his cup. He looked dazed, as if drowning in a sea of sorrows. He thought back to the tragic event that had taken place in the month of Shawwal five years earlier in the harsh, vast and merciless wastelands of Karakum. At noon on the day before that tragedy, the emir Maamoun ibn al-Maamoun, also known as the Khwarezm Shah, had hastily summoned all the scholars who lived under his patronage in the capital of his kingdom. He did not disclose the reason for inviting them to the meeting, which took place on a Thursday afternoon, although that was one of the two days on which the council of scholars did not usually meet in the presence of the emir. They all wondered what the reason for haste might be, why the emir insisted that they all attend and why he could not leave it till the usual time on Saturday evening.

Some of them speculated he was going to announce that he had chosen Abu Rayhan al-Biruni as vizier. There were several signs that this was likely, including the fact that the emir had installed Biruni in his palace a few months earlier out of respect for him, and the fact that he had asked Biruni to measure the circumference of the Earth and calculate lines of longitude and latitude accurately. Biruni devised a formula by which he could achieve this. The emir was also very proud of the two books that Biruni had recently completed: *An Explanation of the Principles of Astrology*, which dealt with the movement of celestial bodies, and *How to Determine the Coordinates of Places and Calculate Correctly the Distances Between Population Centres*. The emir's associates also knew that the emir was uneasy that the military

commanders were interfering in government affairs and were at odds with his wise vizier, Aboul Hussein al-Suhayli. The vizier was advanced in years and no longer able to bear the burdens of office, let alone handle the resentment the Khwarezmian troops felt towards the emir, whom they accused of complete submission to his brother-in-law, Mahmud bin Sabuktikin of Ghazni.

The forty senior scholars met in the emir's council chamber, seated in the usual order. Biruni's face looked pale and slightly jaundiced, and that puzzled them. They were even more mystified when the emir came in scowling, with a scroll of paper in his hand, and did not greet them in his usual way. The emir looked at the piece of paper and, without any long preamble, declared: "I received this letter today from Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni. In it he orders that you be dispatched to his capital without delay on any pretext, because he wants to boast that you are present in his palace."

The scholars were taken by surprise and there were loud murmurings. The emir interrupted them. "It's up to you to decide what suits you," he said, speaking like a man trying to conceal his embarrassment. "I will not force any of you to do anything, so give it careful thought."

After a period of silence Ibn Sina was the first to speak, in a voice that suggested suppressed anger. "No, by God," he told the emir. "I will not myself consent to go there to entertain the sultan at parties. That is work for dancers and singing girls, not at all appropriate for scholars."

"Ibn Sina, you're a distinguished man of wisdom, as are all these friends of yours. He wants to boast to other rulers that he has people like you in his retinue and that you grace his palace," said the emir.

"No, your highness," replied Ibn Sina. "This sultan of Ghazni is not known to have any interest in learning or in scholars. He is famous for fighting his opponents, and he should seek someone else to boast about. I do not wish to become a mere palace ornament."

"Listen, Ibn Sina," said the emir. "I appreciate you will never forgive him for destroying the Samanid dynasty, razing Bukhara, your beloved home town, to the ground and annexing the area to his vast kingdom."

“Allow me, your highness. Forgive me for interrupting you and for what I am going to say, or . . . No, I shall say nothing and I will not put you in an embarrassing position with your brother-in-law. Instead I shall leave this place as soon as possible.”

“Where will you go?”

“I don’t know, sir, I really don’t, but the world is wide and God’s grace is boundless.”

“You have every right to do so, Ibn Sina, what does Master Biruni have to say, and what do the rest of you think?”

“I do not know, my lord,” Biruni said in a troubled voice. “Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni doesn’t appreciate the kind of learning that I do. He doesn’t think that mathematics, astrology and the history of ancient peoples are as useful as the religious learning that he favours.”

Abu Sahl al-Masihi interrupted him, saying: “He doesn’t favour religious learning in general, but only the Sunni school of law, a cause he has recently started to promote to please the Abbasid caliph in the short term and undermine the power of the Buyids, who are inclined towards Shi’ism. He recognises only the Ash’ari Sunni form of Islam, so what would he do with someone like me – a Christian who has worked on medicine and philosophy, which he thinks is associated with atheism?”

In the middle of the gathering, the great scholar Mansur bin Iraq muttered something in a low voice. The only words of his that were audible were: “I see disaster coming! I see disaster coming!”

The debate grew unusually heated, noisy and confused. The scholars known for their Mu’tazilite tendencies or their Shi’ism looked alarmed, and there were many of them. Amid the turmoil the emir stayed silent and looked around at the faces of the scholars, whose world was falling apart before its time. In the end he was so distressed that he suddenly stood up and left the council chamber, weighed down by a sense of shame. He understood that his world had run its course.

In the middle of that dark night, Ibn Sina was sitting in his bedroom, awash with anger and racked by insomnia, when one of his servants came and told him that Abu Sahl al-Masihi was knocking on the door.

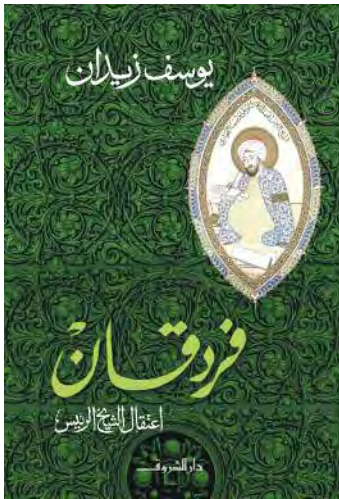
Ibn Sina went to meet him and found him in a pitiful state physically and psychologically. “What’s happened, Abu Sahl,” he asked, “and why are you shaking?”

“I’ve just received some news,” he said.

“Sit here and calm down. What news do you mean?”

Shivering feverishly, Abu Sahl whispered in Ibn Sina’s ear that a trustworthy man from his own Nestorian sect had visited him and told him that a large group of soldiers planned to storm the palace at dawn with intent to kill the emir. Ibn Sina was alarmed. He arched his

About *Fardeqan* – the Detention of the Great Sheikh



The novel depicts the life of Ibn Sina (Avicenna), or “the Great Sheikh”, the Muslim polymath whose work has had a profound influence over the last thousand years. It takes the reader on a thrilling journey from Ibn Sina’s birthplace in a village near the ancient Uzbek city of Bukhara, until his death in Persia after an eventful life. Although he became a vizier twice, Ibn Sina was detained in the remote fortress of Fardeqan, where he wrote some of his philosophical works.

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eyebrows and asked impatiently: “And how did this man find out about this?” He had hardly finished the question when Abu Sahl replied unequivocally: “He’s an old informer. I know him well and I trust him.”

Ibn Sina was puzzled for a moment, even more so when Abu Sahl asked him if there was a lame servant in his house called Wardan. Ibn Sina was surprised, raised his eyebrows and said: “Yes, but how did you know that?” Abu Sahl told him that this servant had been planted on him by the spies of Ibn Subuk, the derogatory name he used to refer to Mahmud of Ghazni. In an even softer voice, he added that one of his relatives had told him that those who had brought this servant over to their side had promised to give him money if he told them immediately if and when Ibn Sina fled the city, as they expected.

“Then what?”

“Then they would go out after you, arrest you and send you in chains to Ghazni.”

“Why?”

“So that Ibn Subuk can put you in prison until you die, because he’s annoyed about what happened in Bukhara and he’s convinced you’re a Shi’ite missionary working for the Ismailis.”

“But I’ve never been a missionary for any religious group, and you know that well.”

“It doesn’t matter what I know. What matters is what these people think and what they will do to you, and to me. They’ll tell Ibn Subuk what you dared to say at our meeting today. They’ve heard about it and they’re even angrier with you now.”

Ibn Sina shook his head sadly and recited a Qur’anic verse: “We shall test you with a certain amount of fear and hunger.” He believed what Abu Sahl had told him about the servant called Wardan, because he remembered that a few days earlier he had spotted him sneaking out of the house by night and coming back before dawn. When Ibn Sina had asked Wardan about it, the traitor replied that he was looking after some orphans on the edge of the city and had secretly married their widowed mother. His explanation was strange and his behaviour suspicious. Why had Ibn Sina unwittingly trusted what he said?

“We have to leave before the break of dawn,” Abu Sahl whispered, trembling again. Ibn Sina took him to his room and on the way woke up a loyal servant called Qunbur who had been working in his house for years. In his room Ibn Sina took out the title deeds to his three male slaves and the old slave woman who prepared his meals. At the end of all four documents he added a declaration that he was setting them free. He attached his own seal and asked Abu Sahl to sign as a witness. He took twenty dinars out of his money bag and gave them and the documents to his astonished servant. “Qunbur,” he said, “this is the last thing I will ask of you. I’m leaving now, but don’t tell anyone. Take seven of these dinars for yourself and in two days’ time give two dinars to each of the others, and their manumission certificates. Don’t let Wardan leave the house or meet anyone during these two days, and if necessary tie him up to stop him.”

“He’s a traitor, sir, isn’t he?”

“Yes, Qunbur, and he’s been planted on me.”

“I had my doubts about him, the bastard. Would you like me to kill him for his crimes and bury him behind the house?”

“No, we’re not murderers, and people’s lives are not our property, for us to destroy whenever we want.”

After Qunbur left, Ibn Sina stood hesitantly in the middle of the room for a moment. He then asked Abu Sahl if he needed to drop by his house before leaving. “No,” he replied. “I don’t have any children or money there and a friend warned me not to go there, because they’re lying in wait for me, just as they are for you.”

Under cover of darkness and obscured by the dust in the summer wind, they left through the back door of the house an hour before dawn, wearing ragged clothes with tattered turbans on their heads. They each had long strings of prayer beads in their hands and around their necks. They looked like Sufi dervishes of the kind known popularly as qalandars. In this disguise they hurried eastwards till they reached the harbour on the bank of the Jayhoun, the large river now known as the Amu Darya. Ibn Sina did not tell Abu Sahl that fleeing might be as dangerous as staying until two hours after they had set sail northwards in their boat, when the sun had already lit up the burning

sky and Abu Sahl's head had recovered from the clutches of drowsiness. As they sat alone at the end of the boat, rocking from side to side, Abu Sahl asked Ibn Sina in a whisper why they were going north.

"Because they expect us to go west," he replied.

"True. That's wise planning on your part, but what next?"

"By noon we'll be far enough away and we'll cross the Karakum desert until we reach the shores of the Caspian. From there we can sail south by boat, then follow the tracks through the Alborz mountains until we reach the city of Ray. We'll be safe there, under the protection of the Buyids."

"Very well. But crossing this arid desert will take two or three days' riding. May the Lord be with us and spare us from bandits."

Near a remote village on the west bank of the river, they disembarked from the boat. From the caretaker of a small church on the edge of the village Ibn Sina bought two emaciated donkeys and the water and other supplies they would need. They proceeded westwards without delay. The vastness of the barren desert was awe-inspiring and troubling, and the probable dangers were many. What was improbable was what they encountered on the morning of their second day in the desert. The first day had passed peacefully and the hardship had been tolerable, and that night they lit a fire within the walls of a derelict house. They were pleased when the wind picked up and started to whine and moan, which reassured them that the area would be free of bandits and roaming wolves.

Abu Sahl suddenly started to sing a mournful hymn in Syriac and stared up towards the stars that appeared from time to time between the scudding clouds. After a while he suddenly stopped singing and said resignedly that he did not feel they would reach Ray.

Ibn Sina realised that his companion was so anxious and exhausted that his mind was befuddled, so he decided to ask him a question to distract him from his thoughts and the aches and pains in his thin and exhausted body. "Tell me, Abu Sahl," he said, "have you sent your latest epistle, the one on the plague and foul air, to the copyists to copy?" Abu Sahl convulsed with laughter in a way that showed he understood the point of the question, but he didn't answer. After a while Ibn Sina

tried to console him by asking him to recite whatever poems came to mind. Abu Sahl immediately recited to him, in Arabic, the first part of the famous line of poetry by Abu Tamman: “The sword is more truthful than any book.” He did not complete the line. Instead he started laughing and sobbing at the same time until his eyes filled with tears because he felt so wretched.

Dawn broke but it wasn’t like any ordinary dawn. The weather was wild, with dust flying everywhere. They wavered a while between continuing their journey and staying within the shelter offered by the walls. When the wind died down for some time, they set off hurriedly and full of hope, unaware of the fate that lay in wait for them.

In the middle of a desert that offered no shelter or place to hide, the winds picked up again at midday and dust devils danced on the horizon. Soon the winds went mad, howling and lashing the ground until they hid the sky from the ground completely. The donkeys’ legs could no longer carry their weight. As soon as the men dismounted, the donkeys panicked and ran off like the wind until they disappeared from sight in the swirling dust. Ibn Sina took off his jelaba, tied the sleeves and made it into something like a column of material to protect himself from the onslaught of the wild storm. He did the same thing for Abu Sahl, but how mistaken he was. The garments could not fend off the stones that came flying with the clouds of dust, and soon the two columns of material were blown away.

Abu Sahl collapsed on the ground choking and shaking. Ibn Sina sat next to him and tried to shield his face from the dust with what remained of his tattered cloak, but it was no use. The storm was wilder than ever and the roar of the wind was louder. The wind picked up pebbles and stones from the ground and hurled them into the air like arrows. Ibn Sina curled up in a heap and wrapped his arms around his poor friend and mentor. Abu Sahl’s thin body was shivering and eventually he lost consciousness.

Ibn Sina called out to him in a voice he could not hear. “Hang in there, Abu Sahl, don’t give up,” he said.

But after a few convulsions, Abu Sahl died, and Ibn Sina lost consciousness too. The wind rolled his body until the sand buried it

and the desert almost swallowed it up. When Ibn Sina regained consciousness several hours later, he found himself alone and becalmed. On his face, which had been battered by stones and pebbles, he found streaks of blood mixed with dust. He staggered around in his tattered clothes until he found a pile of sand and spotted the body of his poor friend under the pile. His eyes streamed with tears.

He looked up at the sky and shouted into the void of the desert: “O God, O God. Was it for this torment that You created us? O God, answer me!”

Translated by Jonathan Wright



The 2020 Judging Panel

Chair of Judges

Professor Muhsin al-Musawi is a literary critic and Professor of Classical and Modern Arabic Literature, Comparative and Cultural Studies at Columbia University. He served as academic consultant for many academic institutions and taught for over two decades at universities in the Arab world before moving to Columbia University. He is the editor of the *Journal of Arabic Literature*, and the recipient of the 2001 Owais Award in Literary Criticism and the 2018 Kuwait Prize for Studies in Arabic Language and Literature. He is the author of 28 works (including six novels) and over 60 scholarly articles. His teaching and research interests span several periods and genres. His books include: *Scheherazade in England* (1981), *The Society of the Thousand and One Nights* (2000), *The Islamic Context of the Thousand and One Nights* (2009), *Anglo-Orient* (2000), *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel: Debating Ambivalence* (2003), *Arabic Poetry: Trajectories of Modernity and Tradition* (2006), *Reading Iraq: Culture and Power in Conflict* (2006), and *Islam on the Street: Religion in Arabic Literature* (2009), which won the Choice Outstanding Academic Title for 2010. He is also editor of and contributor to *Arabic Literary Thresholds: Sites of Rhetorical Turn in Contemporary Scholarship* (2009) and wrote the introduction and notes to the Barnes & Noble Classics Edition of *The Arabian Nights* (2007). His book, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters: Arabic Knowledge Construction* (2015) has been widely acclaimed. He edited *Arabic Literature for the Classroom* (2017). Forthcoming in 2020 is *Arabic Disclosures: The Postcolonial Autobiographical Atlas*.

Members of the Panel

Pierre Abi Saab is a Lebanese critic and journalist, born in Lebanon in 1961. Since the 1970s, he has followed creative trends and varieties of cultural expression in Lebanon and the Arab world, from North Africa to the Middle East. He has worked as a literary and artistic critic, located in Paris, London and Beirut, for newspapers and periodicals, including *Al-Safir*, *Al-Youm al-7*, *Al-Hayat* and *Arabies*, with the aim of renewing the

tools of cultural journalism in the Arab world. In 2004, he co-founded (with a group of new critics and artists) and edited *Corners: Newspaper of Live Culture for Arab Youth*, and in 2006, he co-founded the Lebanese *Al-Akhbar* newspaper, and edited its cultural page. He has also taken part in cultural television programmes, such as his most recent series of interviews with the poet Adonis, broadcast by the pan-Arab Mayadin channel. In 2018, these interviews were published in book form by Dar al-Adab. He now works as deputy editor of *Al-Akhbar*.

Reem Magued is a broadcaster, television journalist and trainer in journalism and media. She graduated from the College of Media, Cairo University, in 1995. In the same year, she began work at the Nile international channel as correspondent, chief editor and presenter of interview and news programmes. In 2006, she was director and creative producer of documentary programmes, before joining ONTV in 2008 as a talk show host. Between 2015 and 2017, she was director of the ONA Academy for media training. Some of the most important programmes she has presented are: Bil Masri al-Fasih, Baladna bel Masry and Gam'u Mu'anath Salem.

Amin Zaoui is an Algerian novelist who writes in both Arabic and French. He is Professor of Comparative Literature and Contemporary Thought at the Central University of Algiers, and previously taught in the Women's Studies Department at the University of Paris. He has won numerous international prizes, including the 1998 French Secondary School Students Prize and the 2007 Cultural Dialogue Prize awarded by the President of Italy. He was director of the Algerian National Library until 2008 and was head of the Algerian branch of the Anna Lindh Foundation for the Dialogue Between Cultures. His Arabic novels include: *The Neighing of the Body* (1982), *Satan's Road* (2009), *The Goatherd* (2011, longlisted for the 2013 International Prize for Arabic Fiction), *Sensual Delight* (2012), *The Queen* (2014), *Leg Over Leg* (2016, longlisted for the 2018 IPAF), *The Pals* (2018) and *The Pasha's Secretary* (2019). Among his most successful French novels are *La Soumission* (1998), *Haras de Femmes* (2001), *Festin de Mensonges* (2007), *La Chambre de la Vierge Impure* (2009) and *L'Enfant de l'Oeuf* (2017). His novels have been translated into over 13 languages.

Viktoriya Zarytovskaya is an academic, researcher and translator, born in Moscow in 1979. She obtained a doctorate in Teaching and Education from the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (Moscow) in 2008. She has translated numerous works of Arabic literature into Russian, including Naguib Mahfouz's *Children of Gebelawi* and *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma*, Alaa Al Aswany's *The Yacoubian Building* and *Chicago* and Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. As an academic, she has conducted research into methods of Arabic language teaching for non-native speakers, and has published more than fifty books and scholarly articles on comparative grammar and analysis of metaphor in Arabic vocabulary. Her books for learners of Arabic are used in the teaching of translation in Russian universities. She teaches Arabic at the College of Humanities, the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (Moscow).

The Translators

Raphael Cohen is a professional translator and lexicographer who studied Arabic and Hebrew at Oxford and the University of Chicago. His published translations include the novels *Guard of the Dead* by George Yarak, *Butterfly Wings* by Mohammed Salmawi, *Status Emo* by Islam Musbeh, *The Bridges of Constantine* by Ahlem Mostaghanemi, and *So You May See* by Mona Prince. He is a contributing editor of *Banipal* magazine, has contributed translations of short stories and poetry to a range of anthologies and magazines, and translates books and articles in the humanities and social sciences. He is based in Cairo.

Paula Haydar is Assistant Professor of Arabic in the Department of World Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at the University of Arkansas, USA. Her translations include nine novels by contemporary Lebanese writers: by Elias Khoury – *City Gates*, *The Journey of Little Gandhi* (both by University of Minnesota Press, 1993 and 1994 respectively) and *The Kingdom of Strangers* (University of Arkansas Press, 1996), which had been awarded the University's 1995 Translation Prize; by Rachid Al-Daif – *Who's Afraid of Meryl Streep?* (Univ. Texas Press, 2007), *Learning English* and *This Side of Innocence* (both by Interlink Publishing, 2007 and 2001 respectively); and by Jabbour Douaihy (all by Interlink Publishing) – *Printed in Beirut*, which was listed on *WLT*'s 75 Notable Translations of 2018, *The American Quarter*, and *June Rain*, highly commended by the 2014 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize, with the original Arabic shortlisted for the 2008 IPAF. Other translations are by Palestinian authors Sahar Khalifeh – *The End of Spring* (Interlink, 2008), and Adania Shibli – *Touch* (Clockroot, 2010), the latter longlisted for the 2011 Best Translated Book Awards, with its original Arabic winning the A M Qattan Foundation's Young Writer's Award; and by Jordanian writer Jamal Naji – *Season of Martyrdom* (BQFP, 2016).

Nancy Roberts is an Arabic-to-English translator 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 has contributed articles to *The Muslim World*, *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, *Studies in Spirituality*, and *Sufi*. 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* (AUC Press, 2007) was commended by the 2008 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize, and her translations of Ibrahim Nasrallah's *Gaza Weddings* (Hoopoe Press, 2017), *Lanterns of the King of Galilee* (AUC Press, 2015) and *Time of White Horses* (Hoopoe, 2016) earned her the 2018 Sheikh Hamad Prize for Translation and International Understanding. Other authors Roberts has translated include Ahlem Mosteghanemi (*Chaos of the Senses*, *The Dust of Promises*), Laila Aljohani (*Days of Ignorance*), Abd al-Rahman Farsi (*Earth Weeps*, *Saturn Laughs*), Ezzat Kamhawi (*House of the Wolf*), and Ahlam Bsharat (*Codename: Butterfly*). Her most recent literary translation is *The Slave Yards* by Najwa Bin Shatwan, (Syracuse University Press, Spring 2020).

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

Sophia Vasalou studied Arabic in London and has a PhD in Islamic theology from the University of Cambridge. She is currently a senior lecturer 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, as well as Hassan Blasim's *The Iraqi Christ* (2014 Independent Foreign Fiction Prize). He studied Arabic, Turkish and Islamic History at St. John's College, Oxford University and worked for many years as a journalist in the Arab world including Tunisia, Oman, Lebanon and Egypt. He was a judge of the 2014 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize. His translations include works by Khaled el-Khamissi, Rasha al-Ameer, Fahd al-Atiq, Alaa el-Aswany, Galal Amin and Bahaa Abdelmegid, as well as the 2019 Man Booker International Prize shortlisted short story collection *Jokes for the Gunmen* by Mazen Maarouf, two IPAF shortlisted novels – Hamour Ziada's *The Longing of the Dervish* (2015 prize) and Ibrahim Essa's *The Televangelist* (2013 prize) – and Amjad Nasser's *Land of No Rain* (commended, 2015 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize).