

# **Saudi Village**

© Ministry of Culture, 2020  
King Fahd National Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ministry of Culture  
Saudi Village. / Ministry of Cultur. - Riyadh , 2020  
ISBN: 978-603-91287-3-1

1- Short stories      I-Title  
813.019531 dc      1441/7240

**L.D. no. 1441/7240**  
**ISBN: 978-603-91287-3-1**

Environmentally  
Friendly Printing



Copyright © 2020 Ministry of Culture.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

**Printed in Saudi Arabia**



هيئة الأدب والنشر والترجمة  
Literature, Publishing & Translation Commission

# Saudi Village

By Saudi writers

Translated By:  
Hamad Alshammari



## The Image

“Hassan Alhazimi”

Well, this is how the image appears before me; 30 years and it has always come of its own accord with no permission from my side.

I was 25 years old, or perhaps 28, or ... I have no recollection of my age then, but it was between those years when the idea matured in my father's mind, so he approached me for an opinion:

“Ali reached puberty and he must be circumcised.”

“Great, the hospital is close by and nowadays things are way better than before,” I replied.

My father rose up, as if he had been shocked by demons, “What?!” he shouted “My son will

not go through all that while lying down under anaesthetic. I swear to Allah that my son will not be circumcised except in the middle of the valley and before all people.”

It was such a firm decision; nobody could even negotiate. He stood up, and called, “Oh Mas’ood, Oh Mas’ood.”

“Yes, Uncle Ahmed, yes,” Mas’ood replied.

“Mas’ood, go east until you reach the mountains, then go west until you reach the sea. Call for all those who know us. And don’t you forget our relatives. Tell them that your uncle Ahmed Altihami, Abu Mansour, is saying ‘Allah Allah’, and his son Ali’s circumcision ceremony will be held on Wednesday.”

Mas’ood set off immediately and as soon as my father publicly announced the occasion with

ten bullets fired out of his rusty rifle, the house and the entire village erupted in celebration. The day before the event, our house along with our close relatives' houses filled with guests from all around. My father was happily dancing, moving from one house to another, welcoming everyone and slaughtering animals. Our family was so worn out: the fire was going non-stop; blood was never dry; ghee and honey were constantly served, and I had no idea when exactly my father had begun to save for this occasion! I think it must have taken him a year or so to gather this number of animals, and to get the corn, the whole-wheat, the flour, the ghee, and the honey. I forgot to tell you about the drums. They never rested except to start over again. We took the celebration, the drums and the dancing to our

uncles' and aunts' houses along with my father's extended family, in order to share the blessings of the event with them all. We danced for about eight to ten hours that day.

Another thing I forgot to tell you about my father was that he danced while walking, jogging, and even while sleeping.

### ***Alshobra, The Night of Reveal:***

I ran into my father –it had been a week and I only met him by chance – and he was exhausted; you could tell from the look in his eyes, yet he tried to shoosh that with his amazing smile.

“Oh father, you must rest a little.”

“Who said I was tired?”

“Your face.”

“It is almost over, Mansour. Soon this whole



clamouring will be behind us, and I can rest then.” His magical smile sharpened, and he left me.

It was 2:30 p.m. and the respected men had already had their lunch and napped. Only my father and I were burning under the boiling sun. I decided to leave everything and go home to see my mother and sisters.

I saw my mother at the door and kissed her forehead, and she kissed my chest. “Ali is taking a nap; don’t you disturb him,” she said.

Ali was sleeping on a small wooden armchair, in the middle of the sun’s shade. His bare feet were lolling over the edge of the armchair, covered with henna, and he was shading his eyes with his left arm. I stopped, looking at him, then I thought evilly, I’m going to annoy him.

I hit him on his chest with my hand, saying, “The blade is here.” He jumped as if a snake attacked him, and breathily said, “What ... what ... who?”

I laughed out loud and said, “It’s me – Mansour, not the circumcision practitioner!”

He swallowed his saliva and looked with accusing eyes towards my mother, who was more worried about the henna.

I told her, “Oh Mother, don’t worry about the henna; Ali’s feet are already dark.”

“This is *Alshobra*, and henna is tradition,” she replied.

Ali was back to his armchair, but this time sat with his legs swinging, with my mother on the floor redoing the henna on his feet.

I began telling him about tomorrow – the

blade that was now so close. “Do you remember, Ali? This blade was a nightmare, and they always scared us with it. Ever since we were very young children, we have been threatened with this blade. Whenever something hurt us, the answer was always: wait until you see the blade, then you will learn something about pain. When we cried because of something painful, they said to us: how about circumcision?! Anything that could scare us was only a reminder of the blade, and if we feared it, they warned us not to humiliate the family by crying on the day of circumcision. So, Ali, here you are, about to overcome the threat that has been like a companion your entire life. The blade is ready, but don't you dare get scared or even blink an eye, otherwise my father will kill you.”

“My son is a man, and he is not the type to close his eyes because he’s afraid,” my mother said.

After the afternoon prayer call, my father passed by and told everyone that they should come to the valley immediately after the prayer.

I ran to perform ablutions to get ready for the prayer. My mother helped Ali get ready; she covered his head with fragranced water; tied his turban; put some traditional herbs between his hair and the turban, and on top of that five jasmine circles; gave him his new kilt-towel, white jacket, and my father’s sword; kissed him on the cheek and said, “May Allah protect you from all envious eyes.”

The valley was crowded. I heard some people say that they had never attended such a cele-

bration.

The drums were loud. The rifle bullets hurt our ears. People were divided: some watched, some danced. Those who watched were standing and made the shape of a horseshoe. By the closed part of the horseshoe stood those who sang loudly, and by the open part stood those who were dancing, going in and out. They performed our own traditional dance, while their backs were towards the mountains. The dance was so enthusiastic, with the whole body shaking in a light yet manly manner. I was next to Ali, dancing a little and resting a little until sunset. The time when we danced was exhilarating with the drums, the shooting, the men's voices. Certainly, none of this was for me, but for my brother.

After dinner was served, my father fired ten bullets, shouting, “Today we will dance until morning.” I had no idea how he had so much ammunition!

My mother ululated along with all the other women participating in such joy. Bullets littered the sky, making little stars that didn’t last for long. It was as if night had turned to day, and no one could sleep.

### **The Last Day:**

With the very first sunlight dawning over the mountains, everyone walked from our house to the valley, led by the drummers; everyone was behind them, running and singing:

*‘Oh, you who will be circumcised, there is no way out’*

*'Oh, you who will be circumcised, your request to back out is meaningless'*

My brother was with the front wave, covered with a white cloth and nothing else, and carrying the sword. I could not count his heartbeats then, but I was pretty sure that I could hear them in spite of all the noise.

When we reached the valley, everyone and everything fell silent; Ali appeared before the crowd. He stepped forward a little and turned to face the throng. He put his sword back in the scabbard; then he held it horizontally against his chest as if he were ready to pull it out again. Ali raised the sword up to the back of his neck, his right hand on the grip and his left hand on the point, as if he were being crucified!

A *Sheikh* was shouting as loudly as he could,

“La la la ... the blade is here, ha ha ha ... the blade is here,” while hitting my brother’s chest with the knife’s fuller. I could see how sharp the blade was as it reflected the sun’s rays. I wondered, *what if he mistakenly hits him with the blade instead?*

“La la la ... the blade is here,” right in Ali’s ear with such a loud voice. Ali was firm, standing still, with not even a blink of an eye. I did not know that he was this brave. I had told him it was all right to blink while the *Sheikh* was shouting, but that it was essential not to do so when they officially started circumcising him. I was really worried that he would lose it eventually, and all the effort he had put in would then mean nothing. I was incredibly anxious, and with those thoughts in mind my father



whispered into my ear, “Take the rifle and shoot three bullets over Ali’s head. Tell him that there are three more bullets. If he blinks, they will go in his head; if he doesn’t, then they will go over his head.”

I refused without hesitation; it was the first time I had ever said “no” to my father in this way. He had no time for arguing; therefore, he did it himself. Like a shot, he went and put the rifle on Ali’s shoulder, shooting three bullets right next to his ear. The other ear was busy listening to the *Sheikh’s* shouts. Ali’s eyes were looking up, and the circumcision practitioner was holding the blade which was extremely sharp. I thought Ali was not conscious; he was not aware of his surroundings. I recalled my mother’s statement: “My son is a man, and he is not the type to close

his eyes because he's afraid."

Moments later, blood was spilt, and Ali was dreadfully injured. My father was covering him with his new towel that was certainly not new anymore. Ali's eyes did not blink; they remained still pointing up, even when everything was over. My father shot the remainder of his bullets over Ali's head, and we carried him back home, singing the same songs again.

Ali was holding the sword the same way, and I was holding him from the right while my father held him from the left. Still no blinking. Ali was bleeding profusely, and my father started to worry because Ali still hadn't blinked even when we reached home. We took him to the same armchair but there was no blinking. Thus, I cried and closed his eyes with my own hands.

My mother cried out, “An envious eye has killed my child.”

My father approached Ali, touching his sweaty yet cold forehead, and his eyes were drowning in tears that resisted to letting go.

## The End of the Asphalt

"Abdulaziz Mishrry"

Voices intersect in the *majlis*, and others almost reach the wooden ceiling arguing. Between one moment and another cigarette number increase, and smoke too. It seems like a verbal fight over something big.

A man of few words looks to be at a late stage of life. He wears *iqal* over his turban, leans back, and puts on his prescription glasses -perhaps they are- which have black frames and are attached to a string to keep them from falling. His eyes, and the way they move, look like those of a cautious cat.

Over his whitish *thobe*, he wears a coat that is open at the front. It is obvious that some but-

tons are lost; hence, it hangs open. Mutair remains at the corner of the *majlis* with his arm hanging over his knee, and says with a weak mouth, yet confidently “Listen to me; the road to Saeed’s house has been well-known for ages. It is known for those who go down the valley or up, but not for cars. People did not have cars back then. So, it is Saeed’s right today to allow cars to reach his house.”

The discussion was heated over this subject. The host comes from inside with a huge teapot and a tray of glass teacups. He sits down and serves tea carefully.

He looks at the men and considers Mutair the oldest, so he starts by offering him a cup of tea. At the right side of the room, next to an old worn-out wooden chair, a boy sits and

plays with a cat whose fur is tiger-like. The cat is happy; it plays with the boy, goes around him, and sits in his warm lap. However, because of the noises it makes, the boy tries to push it away from him, so that it does not steal his memory of the Quran away, as his grandmother has warned him.

Mutair sips the tea loudly, looking directly at the boy and the cat. Others busy themselves with the hot teacups and their cigarettes, as if they are recoiling from the conflict. The noise is gone.

The *majlis* possesses a *Faqih* -a man of religious knowledge- who writes trade deals, and afterwards gains some money as a price for his effort, ink and paper. At the bottom of each document he states his testimony and signs off

“written by Magram bin Ali, may Allah forgive him and his parents” with his cursive Arabic calligraphy fonts like Diwani and Farsi.

And because this man knows, just like everyone else, that Mutair is an old man, and moreover that he was recently attacked by his angry camel which broke his ribs (the camel almost, God forbid, killed him) – because all of that, the *Faqih* knows the situation so he will take the document to Mutair and help him sign with his fingerprint as a witness among all the others.

People all hear from Magram that Saeed deserves a paved, car-worthy road up to his house and, in fact, that all houses that are accessible by either people or animals will have roads for cars, “and Allah is our witness”.

People go on running their life affairs and,

because it is winter, it is foggy outside. One man says, “*May Allah bring rain after this fog.*” All other passers-by say, “Amen.”

Everyone passes through the square, and there is that same cat with three kittens – though a lot more can be heard mewling. Next to a massive green cactus cladode, a man urinates while looking in all directions to make sure no one sees him and that nothing should defile his long *thobe* either.

Mutair also starts to leave like everyone else. He instinctively follows his own nose, as he knows all roads through the village step by step. He goes down to the valley and looks at his farm through his thick lenses. His feet now become entwined with plants which prevent him from seeing the steps down. He stumbles and



trips, screaming because of the pain. His voice almost reaches the whole village.

Sharifa, his wife, realises he is late and remembers him saying this morning that he was going to visit the farm. She runs there, worried about what might have happened.

When her voice reaches the neighbours, men are carrying him, and they take him to his house. They call Ibn Hussain, the village bone-setter, to fix his arm bone. Ibn Hussain recommends that he has eggs and ghee along with any food that is sour in taste and to stay away from anything sweet, even dates. He repeats this to Sharifa, since she will be the one responsible. Since Ibn Hussain never has asked for money, he surly would not take any from Mutair.

Individually and collectively, fellow villagers

visit Mutair. And because of the smell of the ghee and Mutair's bed-ridden body, Sharifa keeps burning incense all the time. But she also tries to balance that, to prevent the smoke from affecting the old man's weak eyes. She bakes at night when he sleeps. This is what keeps her up late after their children sleep.

One day Mutair is intent on having some dates with his coffee, but Sharifa refuses, asking, "What's wrong with you? Ibn Hussain forbade you to eat dates!" She goes and grabs a piece of bread with some eggs. "In a few days you will recover, then you can eat all the sweet things you wish; don't push it," says Sharifa.

"What a calamity it is that has happened to us!"

This is what Sharifa screams when a stranger

arrives all of a sudden and asks for the house of Mutair Alsa'dawi. He reads a piece of paper to the old man, after which Mutair knows for certain that he will have to leave this house and find another one. The plan for the new asphalt road has been made and his house is on this very route, with other houses too. There will be compensation in riyals for sure, but the whole situation and thinking about his life, wife and children make the old man cry silently.

## Azzafer

“Abdullah Saed Almaliki”

He ran as quick as an arrow towards Azzafer<sup>1</sup>, which was crafted from a juniper tree, engraved with some illustrations, and had been in the centre of our house for a long time. All the other wooden columns that support the roof gathered at the top of it.

He laid his back against Azzafer and sat down. He took off his turban and unfolded it gently, then used it to tie his skinny body to this voiceless pillar.

He had a scar on his mouth, and the sun had burned his face so much that he had become almost black. He was sweating, with a tiny dagger

---

1- A very large wooden pillar at the centre of main room in traditional houses in Asir and Albaha provinces, Saudi Arabia

and its belt around his waist, and his *thobe* had stuck to his weak body due to the sweat.

He kept turning his face to look throughout the house, checking its corners and trying to discover the faces of its inhabitants. My sister and I were home alone then, and we were petrified.

He asked me, “Hey boy, where is your father?” I didn’t answer him; I came close to him instead, but cautiously. My sister stepped back towards the furthest corner in the house, shaking and riven with shock and silence. I addressed him with a steady voice, “What do you want? And why are you tied up in our house like this?” He did not answer and fell into utter silence.

After a little while, he checked the knot he had tied around himself, near his belly, and re-

peated his question, "Where is your father?" while he secured himself as if he was planning to stay longer.

I answered, "He is in the valley, and might get back soon." I joined my sister's corner and tried to calm her down. I led her gently by the hand and went out, leaving him alone in our house.

Above a rocky highland that overlooked the village farms, which were packed closely as if they were forehead wrinkles. Green slopes full of juniper, wild olive trees and banana trees, behind which lay the *Tihama* plains, the faraway land, whose sky was veiled by layers of nebula; from above all that, my sister and I stood waiting for my parents to come. I saw my father with my mother right behind him, taking slow steps over the rocks towards the village. Impa-

tiently, we ran to meet them halfway.

My father was tired and sweating, carrying on his shoulder a huge bundle of corn stalks. My mother was carrying almost as big a bundle as my father, while walking very slowly and bending low as if her forehead might touch the surface of the road.

My father knew something was wrong just by looking at our faces. Though exhausted, he stopped and said to me, “What’s the matter, son? Why are you here at this hot noon? Why are you holding your sister’s hand as if she is about to run away from you?”

I immediately replied, “There is a man in the house.” My mother stopped at this moment, but my father kept walking without saying a single word.

We followed him and, by the house door where the animals were kept, my father threw down the bundle and stepped lightly onto the stairs.

I added, nervously though, “He is tied up.” My sister also said, “He tied himself to the Az-zafer with his own turban.”

The look on Father’s face was a little worried, yet he did not comment and walked into the house, while we were behind him holding his *thobe* which smelt of the sun and the farm’s dirt.

The man was still tied in his place and was trying to get rid of the flies around him; his bald head was shining and sweating.

He looked up towards my father who seemed neither surprised nor very angry, which was not what I had expected.



My father greeted the man, sat down next to him and tried to untie him, while the man tried to prevent him doing this, looking directly at my father's face and said, "I seek refuge in you." My father tried hard to untie him and said repeatedly, "Granted, granted!"

The man repeated his only phrase as if he doubted what he heard, and father too repeated what he had said and kept trying to untie the man.

My mother came and gasped deeply when she saw the man; she slowly stepped backwards putting her hand on her chest while her face looked surprisingly shocked and tired. She looked around and then went to the opposite corner of the house.

The man finally allowed my father to untie

him, so my father did this gently and put the man's turban over his head, helped him stand up and asked to him to sit in the middle of the *Hayer*<sup>2</sup> .

Without expressing any blame at all, my father asked the man about his family, his village and his tribe to comfort him. Often, my father addressed my mother, asking her to hurry up with the coffee and lunch.

The man had some coffee and wheat bread that my mother had made with some ghee, whose smell permeated everywhere. Then his face was consumed with sadness and he said, "We missed summer this year and last year; our farm was totally killed by the cold weather, so we gained nothing. It was a disaster. I sold

---

2- The main majlis, or biggest room in a house

the cow, the bull and some sheep. We used the money for two years until we had nothing more to spend. Hunger tired us and weakened our bodies. I reached you, seeking help, and the situation is exactly as I've told you." He moved his hands in the air, and his eyes were bright with the tears in them while he cautiously awaited my father's response and his facial expressions too. My father did not let one word spill out, just like the custom of the village; instead, he got up and reached his belt-pocket that was hanging on the wooden door of the little room where he used to sleep. He unbuttoned the pocket of his special belt, the one he used only if he travelled to Makkah or Taif. He used to show off about the belt's quality: the leather from which it was made, and the different colours and im-

prints so artfully created by the craftsman in the Bukhries Souq in Taif.

My father presented all the things from inside the pocket for the man to see. There was paper note money in different colours: the red one was a hundred; the green was fifty riyals; the grey was ten, and the brown was one riyal.

The man gathered everything up without even counting it, and put it inside his old shirt next to his sweaty pallid skin. He smiled, expressing gratitude, and stood up with his joints cracking.

My father escorted him to the door of the house. And after the man had walked away, my father turned to us and sighed deeply while carrying his empty belt, threw his tired body in one room and looked up to the ceiling. He said, “We

ask Allah for wellness!” and peacefully closed his eyes to nap.

## Heart of a Woman

“Ali Alshadawi”

My sister told me once, “This happened many years ago.”

She stretched the time, and I could not imagine that. Now, as I look back, I feel as if I were still that child watching Ahmed Aldeek<sup>3</sup> and his wife.

As they were preparing their breakfast, I heard the moo of the bull. Then there was some noise that ran all through the place. In a blink of an eye, the noise turned out to be a raging bull running directly towards them.

Ahmed’s wife lay down on the ground and closed her eyes. From beneath the curve of her

---

3- This comes as a family name or nickname linked with cowardice and ‘being chicken’ as it means the rooster or cock in Arabic.

armpit, she tried to see her husband run and climb the tree; the bull stayed there as if it was waiting for him to step down.

I just remembered the story of the first time the bull butted Ahmed, and the other times which followed too. I wondered why he had not sold it, but he kept it as a friend instead, calling it by its name, *Sabeeh*, just as men are called. Over time, I heard some of the villagers say that their relationship was not merely of a man with an animal. It was rather a companionship between two peers. The more they ploughed the land together, the stronger their relationship became. We, the children of the village, started to play roles the bull Sabeeh and his owner, Aldeek.

The only person the bull was peaceful with

was Ahmed's wife. There was no single incident of any kind when she used to feed it, move it, and so on. When it saw someone else, the bull raged, and it is only when she took hold of its nose ring that it was quiet and calm.

From high up in the tree, Ahmed watched his wife's beauty which was stolen from all the birds in the village; she was like a queen bee dressing up in a yellow and black dress, walking close to the bull.

She touched the bull's back and looked up.

She said, "Get down, you ...!"

He replied, "Say it, say 'you Aldeek'." He added while laughing so hard, "This is a bull, and in front of the bull, it is only one life."

They resumed their breakfast, and they were a part of the scene of the countryside the



ground was covered with thick grass, and trees stood here and there stretching their branches in all directions. Birds were coming and going, back and forth, as if they denied the manmade borders between farms. The blue sky covered everything, and not far away there was a mountain shrouded by fog and cloud.

That night, Ahmed sold the bull to one of the rich people of the village who wanted to distribute its meat for charity. Ahmed's wife took the bull to the slaughtering spot; no man could tie the bull up, so they asked for her help.

Ever since that moment, no villager could forget the scene: while she was tying it in place, the bull calmly smelt her dress. After she had finished, she covered her face with her hand and wept.

## **Hem of the Abaya**

**“Ali Almajnooni”**

I was following my mother, holding on to the hem of her abaya, using it to protect my face from the sun, wipe off my sweat, or even clean my nose when needed; everything was done under one condition: I should not be even one step behind, otherwise she might discover what was going on. Sometimes, I forced her to stop; I pulled her abaya as if I was holding a rein, so she stopped still as a rock. At other times, I pointed at a mini market, moving merchant, or at kids playing. She would look at my mostly silent indications, then we would keep going. In so many instances, she stopped so suddenly that I hit her from behind or trod on her foot;

she cursed those who brought me to life! Or in best scenarios she would curse me to fall from grace. People passing by in cars called us names; such bitterness, sometimes, is followed by silly flattery. My mother never mentioned that to anyone, and I never commented.

On that day, she carried with her some coffee, dates, yoghurt, or indeed anything that was given to us out of charity; it was food from the neighbours. These women ate the stuff and then had mouths full of tales and secrets of others; they chewed these tales and secrets while under the shade of the house of Abi Daladih. He was a jobless man who did literally nothing, and he liked it when we visited because of me; perhaps he never admitted it, but I could read it clearly in his eyes. Maybe it was because I was the

only male he could meet. I asked him to tell me the story of the man who painted his ear with blood; he laughed a little and then told me that he had forgotten the story. The past seventy years have made him forget everything but dates and coffee. He would lie down on his back in whichever room of the house, putting one leg on his other knee, and sang miserable songs that would never be completed. He tried to look through the living room if he felt like eating. And there was no way he would cover himself if his *Thobe* fell off unless his wife yelled, "You are not ashamed of Allah or people!"

With such words, eyes looked at him, then he covered his private parts, and the living room went back to its business with all the women talking. He was not alone in being yelled at; I

was included in the deal. One woman said to my mother, who could not care less, “Your child is so big, look how tall he has got!”

Others joined her, complaining, “Yes indeed, if he were married, he would have a son walking with him!”

That living room was flooded with stories, secrets, and various smells too: incense, mixed herbs, body odour – even the old man lying down was contributing to this. The smells eventually disappeared thanks to the air from the run-down ceiling fan which passed over these bodies.

Abo Daladih asked me about the men; I told him about the hands that farmed and sowed the fields after the rain, but he soon started to

snore. I walked away from him towards the living room, and when I was by that door, the eyes of Maliha attacked me just like the eyes of a lizard: they did not blink except to sharply glare again. She was the oldest among the group; all other women circled around her. She spoke very little, but with many dos and don'ts. At that moment she was talking about pregnancy sickness. Then she pinched her nose with her fingers and turned her face around the room, so I understood that she was accusing me of making a bad smell that I never did. The other women immediately followed suit and pinched their noses one after another. I am almost certain that most of them did not smell a thing; they just had to continue what Maliha had started. A voice cried out sarcastically, "That's just what we need!" and

another one said, “Look at your child Ghaniya; haven’t you taught him anything?!”

I was incensed, as if all my blood had rushed to my head when I looked at my mother’s face. I jumped into the middle of the circle; a short member of the group tried to catch me, but I hit her hand. They all stood and moved around. I went out, but when I did so the gold bracelets of the short woman scratched my arm.

I passed the main door and never turned my face towards their place again. I walked through the village. I felt such wild excitement that I had now become a man. I went through my day, falling and rising. When I fall down, I became close to the ground, listening to men sowing the fields, building houses, and opening roads.

While I ran along, I looked at my arm bleeding.  
That gold injury in my arm made me excited,  
and I felt something similar to laughter.



## **The Camels Men's Road**

**"Omar Taher Zaila"**

I took off my cotton sweater, that was already wet with my sweat, before I stepped into my house. I carried it in my hand and went in feeling suffocated and longing to take off all my clothes. The sun in its summer sky was dominating the entire scene, inside and out. I can still feel how hot it was over my head. Everything in my mind had melted with the sweat dripping out of my body. My only thoughts were of a cool breeze and glass of cold water.

I saw her leave our cottage-like room for the open area, drowned in her sweat. She was walking and the house entrance was behind her. The sun surrounded our house. In that quick glance,

I saw my wife and her body wobble with routine and boredom. An image of her younger years sparked in my mind!

How rough time is on people! She heard my footsteps, turning towards me with a look of complaint on her face. I wished I could see a shade of a smile on her. She opened her eyes in a way that scared me, putting her hand on her forehead as if the circle of the sun was attacking her; she seemed more tanned, and this showed her aging features! I felt that I had to look at her face too, but my desire for a cool place was stronger. She turned again and walked away, bending revealingly at the front. A glimpse of her body from twenty years ago flashed up and then disappeared into the folders of memories as quickly as lightning in an endless woodland

night.

I looked at the water jar there under the shade; beneath the jar were dry weeds hanging and still a little green. It didn't seem like there was any water in the jar. My thirsty eyes kept looking for any pot with water; all the pots were empty and on the ground. So, no water; I should have asked her, but the way she ignored me made me hesitate! I asked myself quizzically: there was no conflict between us, we hadn't fought in a while! What made her ignore my presence now? One possibility jumped into my mind!

I looked at the sweater in my hand. This must be the reason and nothing else. I called, "Oh Su'da...!"

She hummed and didn't leave her spot! I saw

her bending silently to grab something from the floor. I caged my other questions and started searching for water in all possible places: there was no water. The big clay jar was standing there, dry and exposed under the sun. I left for a patch of shade next to an old dying tree. There we had some tanks which collected water, salty like the sea, for showering and washing purposes. I felt thirstier and even hotter and, as I approached her, I saw her repair an old dress, wiping the sweat off her face with the hem. I sat behind her on a wooden armchair and said weakly, "There isn't a drop of water!"

She replied without turning her face. "And there isn't anything else, have you forgotten that?"

I remembered her list of things that the

household needed early that morning: “No water, no food, no coffee, no, no, no...”

Ashamed, I said, “No, I have not forgotten. But the heat is what brought me back home. The water has not yet arrived in town; everybody is in the square waiting for it. But I didn’t think that we could have run out of water like this.”

She sighed, “And yet, they are dry, as you can see.”

Then she went silent. A breeze arrived and filled my lungs with air. I felt a little comfort. I sneaked out quietly, taking the camel men’s road towards the *souq*. Along that narrow path, all the houses’ doors were open. People were under the shade waiting for the water to arrive with despair as intense as their sweat. I had not seen

the sun as livid as it was on that day; I felt like it was spilling bursts of boiling glass. The hot ground, the leaves on it, and the rubbish littered here and there smelt like fire. At the doors stood thirsty old women, and girls whose faces were wavering and wondering, “Why is it this late?” I passed by as if I were mute and saw a tall lady with a happy face; she seemed as if she had come out merely for joy, talking to a boy. She was pointing at my hands, smiling. I remembered then that I was still carrying my sweater. I lowered my gaze with some stiff smiles. I felt as though I had drunk the goodness from that face in a glimpse, in spite of the harsh glare of the sun and the memory of Su’da. I had a silly thought: how come beautiful things arrive just when someone is just about to depart? It was a

painful sigh that I let out as I walked along, yet there I was, walking even further away, putting myself at a great distance from so many things. I turned, approaching the *Mihnāt* square. From the direction of the sea, I was hit by a very hot wind, yet it was lighter.

The square was a wasteland, and on its west side people were sitting and standing, waiting for the camels to bring water. Behind them, the sea filled the whole horizon, steady and humble under the dictating sun; it looked like a melted, endless board. The *souq* was still, with no movement, and there stood the old castle with its broken walls and fallen roofs, exposed to the swords of the day; it looked imperfect and vague, like a book with missing pages. The castle... the castle, this is how people merely view

it. Under the castle was the storage where I had worked as a guard for years. I saw it as a hovel – mean and stingy. I shook my sweater and checked its small pockets to see whether they had any keys inside: *there, you are still safe*. I kept walking steadily, but a little worried. I passed through the square towards the dark stores. The grain silos were covered with fabric bags and, on the top of those lay some smooth rocks. The salesmen were shrunken against the shade of the walls, waving paper handheld fans back and forth in front of their faces. I passed by quietly trying to avoid any water-related enquiries or heavy conversation. None of them stopped me and soon I was near a café, whose owner was busy washing teacups. When he saw me, he started walking slowly and called to me, “Hey,



here you are, finally! Come over man!”

He was under the full sun, and almost topless; his skin was yellowish with some spots. I tried not to mind about how filthy his fingernails were, and yet he had used them to clean the cups.

I always come to this café, but my thirst was stronger than any feeling of loyalty. I grabbed a pot with water, warm from the sun. I sipped but the sea winds had dehydrated my body. The café owner grabbed my hand and we went to sit together inside the café.

He chatted a lot about water, grain and heat; all these subjects together were too much to handle. However, I felt comfortable enough to open up and talk to him about the lack of everything at my house and the whole situa-

tion. My friend's face glowed and he looked at me and said, "You should help yourself to it all, man!" I knew exactly what he was saying! He leaned close to me and said in self-confidence, "You bring me some coffee beans and skin, and some sesame from the storage. That won't cost you anything. Don't you have the keys?! Your pocket will be stuffed full, and every day you will have what you desire with no real effort to speak of."

I felt besieged, unsure of what to say. I felt a massive burden as though a large tapered stone was piercing me. But broken-hearted Su'da, her careless attitude, the sun above my head, and everything else could not allow me to deny the fact that he placed something in my hand. When I was about to leave, he said, "Don't waste

time waiting for water! I will ask my vendor to fill up all of your pots and tanks; I have enough in the café.”

As I left his café, the prayer call for the noon prayer seemed to be a sign of objection and advice: Allah is Greater, Allah is Greater. It was a faint voice, yet very compelling.

On the way to the storage, I hesitated over whether I would do it. The image of my employer's face came before me in various forms: bad and good. I thought to myself, *he too sells old stuff for the price of new and asks me to testify falsely: "Isn't it original, Aman?!" I reply: "Absolutely, Sir!"* I walked twice around the storage. I was only afraid of destroying my reputation; the third time around the storage took me again to the camel men's road, which was bustling this

time. The camels were reaching town and seeing them there summed up the whole story of the people's thirst. I thought, *how come the sun is so cruel on the heads of these seaside people?* I saw a tall woman carrying a water jar after she had grabbed it off the back of a camel. She carried it as if it was a baby, and she had such a shifty look on her face; I don't know why I thought she was a widow!

My sweater now was on me and I passed through the road feeling glad that I did not need to bargain for water this time. In the square I took a big pot and sent it home with a boy I hired. This was my first time being a master. The moment I told myself this fact, the storage came to my mind. I touched my sweater's pockets and walked towards the sea along some path

until I reached the beach. I turned left along the houses' walls. The sun gave up its daily cruelty after sunset, and the breeze was at its best in the shade. I walked about halfway through the town, wandering aimlessly. From my heart came a thousand eyes watching me, a thousand ears listening to me, and my right hand reached to feel the down payment in my pocket.

I passed by some kids playing in the shallows of the sea, and girls coming towards the sea's edge to fill up their tanks with its dark, salty water. A smell of fried fish came from some small houses. I thought that perhaps at this moment Su'da might be frying the fish I sent home. I felt that I needed food, and my hand was still resting on my pocket, but I went on further with my walk.

I passed the dry path between the beach and the customs building, next to the chimney and petrol-station; I felt suffocated and a little fatigued, so I continued east via a little valley that leads up to the eastern hills. Once I had reached the top of the hill, I followed the shepherds' way down to the town from the south, which is the castle side. Here I was, in front of my safe storage asking myself why it took me so long to get here! I felt a burst of courage when I saw the square empty, and that ugly café seemed to call and entice me impatiently. Why was I so afraid? I was the trustworthy guard who could open and shut the storage whenever I wished. Not all guards required permits in order to open doors. I grabbed the key and opened the door.

At home, while eating our lunch, my wife

said, “They cheated you; the fish wasn’t fresh and the ghee was bad; the water tasted as if they had taken it from the sea, and the coffee beans were not local!”

It felt like a knife stabbing into me. I ran to the café, but the owner only yelled angrily at me, “Did you bring me grains of ants?” He started scratching his skin while turning back to his dark hole, the café, and demanded, “Go away, you cheat!”

When I got home, my wife was scratching her skin too and complaining of ants. I was puzzled, “Ants?!” She confirmed, “Yes, you brought them here with you.”

The café owner’s words remained echoing in my head, “You cheat!”

We were all silent as we watched the lines

of ants coming along the camel men's road. A sound from outside our house broke the silence, "Aman! Aman!"<sup>4</sup>

---

4- Although Aman is not a common name in the region, it was used here to show irony since it implies honesty and trustworthiness.



# **The Smell of Tar**

**“Mohammed Alrashidi”**

## **1**

When I asked my father about him, I could see a cloud of sorrow pass through his eyes and a swarm of memories collect in his tear duct. He was gazing far away towards the horizon. His face scowled; his fingers relaxed. And he put his coffee cup on the floor, disregarding everything, and said in a whimpering voice, “Hayaze’s died!”

## **2**

He was a master of both: summer and winter.  
Of hot and cold together!

He positioned the logs into the fireplace and watched tar drops coming out of the burning

wood through clouds of smoke. One drop after another in a pot that was so black and rusty. When the pot was full of tar, he was full of happiness in his chest, which was brimming with asthma, coughs and tiredness from over the years!

He used to distribute this ‘juice of wood’ in previously used vegetable oil cans, sitting in a corner of the Sunday market. That corner happened to turn busy once people located the strong smell of the tar. It had become like a crowded shrine as people knew that this paint of Hayaze’s was one of a kind, and the smell was exactly what drew them there.

His clients removed the lids and brought the cans closer to their noses; when the smell essentially reached their brains, they bought up

the tar cans until they all sold out. Then, Hayaze would light up a celebratory cigarette, and sing an attractive southern melody, “As the wind comes along often, the water comes out of the ground.” He tied his ghutra on his head and disappeared into the crowd of the market.

### 3

Within the market scene, Hayaze was a legend among the people; a figure that could never be missed when he rode by; a colour on beds and other wooden items that were painted with tar to protect against insects; and a smell which penetrated through girls’ hair whenever their scalps were badly bitten by lice!

He provided the cure, beauty and warmth!

In the summer, all kind of insects would come

out of the ground and stick to the skin of animals, eating off their bodies like parasites; they were then rubbed with Hayaze's paint to make them vanish, and hence the animals could rest.

In the winter, when the winds arrived from the north making everything on the ground as cold as shrapnel, and when the bitter cold devoured the skinny cattle, leaving them dead on the roads like meals for maggots, then the smell of tar would surface within their pens, to be brushed onto the animals' shivering bodies to keep them warm until winter leaves.

#### 4

One morning, a question spread like fever, and Hayaze's absence was the very reason.

The smell that filled the place – the basil and

all the other herbs – could not replace the smell of tar. Noses were starving, longing for the smell of wood fire. They went to his corner, but he was not there. The place was empty of everything excepting uncertainty and tears of loss; a loss that planted jabbing pain in the whiteness of the morning as soon as it was announced, “Hayaze has died.” People’s happiness shut down; they were drowned in grief; but when the shock was over and they woke up, they asked, “When? How?” But questions were helpless, and certainty was difficult to attain. That shower of questions helped them with nothing. Many stories were told; people created detailed narratives to satisfy their uncertainty: narratives for death and absence. “Hayaze’s died” was said again and again, and death is an undoubtful fact, and the

area became a hotbed for quenching people's curiosity; sometimes it was even enjoyable to listen to; and there was no end to it.

## 5

They said that one day he was threatened by fire as it touched the tip of his fingers, but he didn't care. Then, fire moved over his lips and couldn't be extinguished, and it went over the skin on his face and he became anxious. Due to his agitation, the fire took charge and totally smothered him...

## 6

It was also said that he was hard as a rock!

They warned him not to come close to a certain tree because the Lord of Jinn slept with

his woman there and the tree had become their home. But Hayaze – one morning – took his axe and struck one of the branches. After that, he vanished, and the axe was left there with the sound of the winds echoing to anyone who sat under that tree. People eventually stopped searching for the man who disappeared just like a mirage, although his shout can still be heard and his axe is still stuck to the tree with the branch bleeding to this very day: the colour is blood, and the smell is of tar!

## 7

They say that he was in love!

Amazingly, she attracted him one day in the market, so he gave her free tar. As she was leaving, carrying what she had bought, pigeons

flew out of her chest to land on his hungry eyes, so he followed her. He offered her all that he owned. He was told, “You smell of animals and look like a burnt-out log!”

He felt bereft so that night he made a massive fire with all the wood he possessed, and when the fire looked angry, he threw his shoes into it and stepped forward, looking directly at it. His eyes had their own fire too. He threw himself in, and at dawn the fire ate his bones along with the wood.

## 8

People said also bad things about him. Once they said that Earth would not accept him for burial. Wherever they dug, they found stinky tar. Therefore, they decided just to dump him



in a hole. When they threw his body in, some black flakes floated on the air, and whoever they touched would be covered with darkness forever. They put some sand in to bury him with, but the sand melted in tar and disappeared. The body simply floated in the hole. It was impossible to close that hole over, so they left him.

One day, it was really hot. People and animals were thirsty, so they reached for water but found that it stank like a carcass. Hayaze's mother said, "This the curse of Hayaze, since you left his dead body with no dignity nor a grave to cover him." Everyone resolved to go back and try everything to bury him. They found the hole covered with ash that was still warm.

He withered like a humble branch of a large tree, which the wind kept hitting until it died, broke, fell and vanished into the sand! On that day, he woke up before the light of dawn. He used an axe to deal with the branches and logs as he wanted to make it all neat; he took a length of string and, bringing all the logs together, he used it to tie them up firmly with his bleeding fingers: blood that was dark in colour dried around his broken nails, and mixed with the salty sweat that he wiped off his forehead with his fingers. Deftly, he picked up the wood stack and put it on his head, although he had to regain his balance by moving a little. Eventually he anchored himself and stood still, then proceeded to his fireplace. He set down the

wood and lay down for a while, trying to ease his backache. Cruel tiredness had taken over his entire body.

He untied the stack, taking one stick at a time to place tidily on a metal board, and sat the board on the pot which held the tar. He started the fire, and it blew heavy smoke in his face, and because the smoke had gone into his nose and lungs, he had to turn his face away from the fire. He started to cough up blood and heavy mucus, so he spat out whatever was in his mouth. He was on his knees, vomiting up a black substance, but the coughs kept on attacking his throat like arrows. He screamed out but the coughing interrupted his cries. Dust filled his nose and mouth, and his rapid breathing dragged the dust deep into his chest to completely suffocate

him. His body shook for a moment and then fell still with not a single movement.

When evening came, the late sun made a little shadow of tiny wood stick onto a sandpile that covered a hole, which was dug by strangers who passed by quickly. They buried a marbling dead body lied on the ground; they covered it with sand and ash without knowing who it was.

## 10

They said: after Hayaze died, winter never came!

## The Rider

“Mohammed Alwan”

There was no way that the inhabitants of Al-Farhan's Village could sleep at night without listening to the yelling between Faye' and his short wife – short compared to his great height. Most days, she tied her head up with a yellow handkerchief, above her black hijab. It was said that she suffered repeated headaches because of their argument; but equally, it was said that she was merely an oriental woman and that her headaches had nothing to do with that. Someone else said that if a woman doesn't *scream* at night, then she ties up her head during the day. I understood then that Faye' was tall apart from when speaking of his legs!

When returning home from Sunday market as the sun was in the middle of the sky, Faye' was tired out and his legs almost touched the ground as he rode his worn-out donkey with its gaping mouth. We used to look at him with evil smiles or scared laughter. This was one night of domestic fighting which stood out above all others; all the villagers knew that tomorrow was Monday market, so Faye' slept alone, and his wife left for the market early in the morning without the handkerchief. She replaced him for that day.

Death almost visited the tall one; the second day it actually caught up with him; and on the third day Faye' died

Just when the villagers wanted to wash his body for one last time, his wife – wearing a

black handkerchief on top of her yellow one – cried out with a voice that shook the entire village, “For Allah’s sake, don’t wash him with cold water because he has never liked it.”

## **The Knight of the Scarecrows' Dreams**

“Mansour Alatiq”

The farmer, Muneef, once discreetly said to me:

“The field is mine and I know it well. I am only responsible for one scarecrow; I have no idea where the rest came from!”

Regardless of all these years – the desert years whose length is incomparable – I have not forgotten the hate left by Muqrin, they are so buried in my chest!

I don't know why I recall his memory now, or why I am retelling his story, but perhaps it is to remember these old conversations with all their details. They entertained us throughout



the long nights. People in the village have not been generous enough to host Muqrin in their memory. Men have become as old as their old poet Muqrin's *hijaniyat*<sup>5</sup>. Women of the village tried to feign insincere modesty of such talk, although it was once delicious to them. The youngsters were kids at the time of Muqrin: they did not feel sad; they did not have fantasies about beautiful women; therefore, talk of such an amorous man was irrelevant. The romantic man who wandered through meadows and sang poems to the wind, darkness, and finally to the scarecrows.

I remember the time when the entire village was totally fascinated with Muqrin; I was really worried for him. And when they drove him out,

---

5- A type of Arabic poetry that can be recited with melody, common in the desert areas

I was anxious to protect him from the winds, from the farms in the north that he used to visit, and from the scarecrows in the meadows. Before he vanished, I asked him to leave his story with Muneef, the farmer who now possesses all the details. Muneef told me:

“Right after the incident with Sheikh Basam, Muqrin visited me a lot; he had special talks with me and made me tea. He was nice to me. I thought he intended to marry my daughter, Haila. I was happy, you know, and tried to arrange the wedding, helping to prepare Haila. But time went by, and Muqrin had not mentioned anything about Haila or the wedding. In fact, he never spoke about women. I remember one time he mentioned the name Sara by mistake. But he got nervous and tried to change the

subject.”

This village is just like children’s stories, and the people are just like the characters in the stories who are playing their exact roles and then leave and disappear in the far distance, to end up in the oblivion.

Nobody else but Sheikh Bassam is the one in charge, and this has always been so. He is the one who *must* provide an opinion on all matters.

He sends backstage those people whose role he believes is complete and sends *behind the sun*<sup>6</sup> those whose roles are not needed in the village.

Muqrin, as the one and only village poet, was no exception to these rules of Sheikh Bassam. In fact, he was the first in line to be observed through his microscope and be addressed with

---

6- An Arabic idiomatic expression of how people with power can make someone disappear

his short, angry talks. Muqrin was not merely a man of the public; he was almost an idol. People praised him and felt some sense of belonging to him. They made up occasions to celebrate, just to have an excuse to sing.

Poetry before the time of Muqrin was an ugly accessory of the village; it was only needed rarely, if at all. Poetry was like an official employee who gets paid to provide tasteless praise and lies. In the evenings, It becomes flattery yet women will not care about: on eye kohl one time, and on colourful dresses another, nothing but stupid comparison with the moon!!

Muqrin's *hijaniyat* made the village breathe poetry and put their faith in it. The village learned once again about the grieving tears of lamentation, and the value of praise. Wom-

en ignored their husbands to go and listen to Muqrin and to taste, with sparkling eyes, the zest of love that he flattered out of their hearts. He taught the village the basics of fine taste in words, words that men thought they did not deserve to hear during a night's wild desires.

Muqrin made the village get up every morning to join in the work of the farmers. He made the village dress in modern styles and forget about Sheikh Bassan along with his chronic diseases. I observed all this while going back and forth from the city to the village. I was amazed. How could one man have this effect, while armed only with poems – only with poems?! The poor farmer, Muneef, told me about the pain that the village suffered, so that the rich could remain rich and live in comfort. However, when he re-

alised that I was sincerely concerned, he spoke openly and was generous with the details:

“I will be honest with you. When Muqrin told me about Sara, the woman he mentioned in my presence once, I thought he was joking. I asked, “What about Haila?” But he was surprised and seemed apologetic, and told me that he wanted Sara, loved Sara. I asked him about her, “Who is she?” He replied, “She is your field scarecrow, Muneef!”

Muneef felt a little embarrassed, pretended to cough and went silent.

After a while, he began again. “I don’t deny that it was a cheap trick of me. Muqrin was a real romantic, with a heart like a bird’s, but I could not understand him. I was misguided by my financial situation, so I got the dowry fi-

nalised. I pretended that I was happy and said, “What a blessed moment; Sara is your bride!” I am so ashamed of myself. I always accused the entire village of treating me unjustly; yet here I am, having been so deceitful and treating Muqrin badly.”

There were more and more fake coughs of embarrassment, and then more details too. “I falsely convinced myself that I was handing over the heart of bird to a unique scarecrow: a scarecrow that knew how to befriend well-behaved birds. If I had been sane, I would have seen that it was only out of damn necessity that I did it.”

So, this is it! Muqrin didn't feel pain because he had been defeated; rather, the pain was caused by his rivals not celebrating their vic-

tory; because he passed as a traditional poem, there would be no celebration and no singing.

I still remember the incident of Sheikh Basam and that disturbing evening. After that ceremony, everything changed: it was the wedding of Ibn Rashid, full of social hypocrisy until Muqrin took over the whole scene. Poems started falling like rain, colourful rain that made the land produce more happiness, greater astonishment and crazier dancing! Sheikh Basam yelled at everyone that Muqrin had to stop polluting the celebrations and the blessed marriages in the village. He announced that people had to stop acting foolishly in order to deserve the blessings that Allah bestowed on their children. They would have to abandon the romantic poet, otherwise they would need to find another



er sheikh to perform their marriages as well as their divorces.

I still remember people driving Muqrin out under that tasteless pressure. They wiped their memories of his poems, choosing to be subjugated and submissive, as if they had planned it that way.

Men and women vomited out poems and cleaned them up with such disgust. They claimed that they knew what real poetry was. They deliberately chose to wear dullness on their faces. They became redundant, carrying heavy burdens on their shoulders as though they actually enjoyed walking hand in hand with cruelty through the roads and village market. The darkness of the night in Ten Street or the afternoon market now started early, sometimes right after

midday.

I tried to understand, but repeatedly Sheikh Bassam would appear to me smug and arrogant, and the entire village was suffering ritual submission.

When Muneef wanted to sum it all up, he said,

“Once Muqrin had disappeared, the village let one day after another slip away; meanwhile, the scarecrows were getting ready for more poetry-birds.”

After Muqrin had so elegantly decorated the memory of the village, the old dust of Sheikh Bassam settled over everything once again.

I was soon to put a stop to my habit of these little visits to the village. I packed, and the truck took off aimlessly, leaving behind it Ten Street

and heading towards the motorway I turned my face back to gaze at the village.

A curtain of sand vividly blocked the village, and then vanished rapidly towards the horizon.

## **Returning to the Little Motherland**

“Yahya Emgasim”

The tree and the small wall stick to the palm frond ceiling as two fearful children poke their faces into their mother’s lap.

### **Yesterday...**

The cow buyer came. He took a rope and dragged the rest of the hay and then the sun went down behind the tree and the wall.

My mother gave me the proceeds of the deal – the cow – in exchange for being separated from one another!

I am leaving; I have to become a soldier. I will send my picture to my mother with the birds, and she will mount it in the corner of the palm

frond ceiling; there under the lantern, just as she told me, and she speaks again, “There will be no weeping for the soldier or missing him but she will lie under my bed, and at night the soldier and his beautiful suit will be my companion.”

### **This morning...**

The farewell arrows have shortened, and there is nothing here worth staying for. My mother was the first and last person to take her leave.

When I was set off, there was nothing else around except a tree whose leaves almost fell like tears.

Sometimes silence can mean many different things; and with the generous tears that her tender heart spared when I left, my mother (not the tree) said, “Leaving is like death!” This was

one of her life philosophies.

Summer came while I was burdened with tears, and my beloved mother stared at my footsteps. Soon I would be gone. I heard her say, “Muhammad! Don’t let the driver go fast! Drive carefully, you will reach your destination quickly and safely!” Oh. If only she knew I was riding the heart of a bird flying north!

My right hand was carrying luggage and food, the other was holding a small bag that had remained for a while under my mother’s bed. The bag used to hide there in sorrow over her former companion, my brother, who left us two years ago to be buried under the sand. The bag contained his pencils, his beautiful notebook

and some of his beloved mother's kindness. My mother insisted on adding to my woes with this bag, so that I would soon return and never forget this town.

### **Before travelling...**

I put the money she gave me yesterday under her bed. She whispered, "Everything that comes to life will fade after you leave!" But why? This question made me freeze for a while; what is all this about? I returned to my consciousness. I shook off these thoughts, kissed her forehead and hand; love intertwined like raindrops on her cheeks, and she mumbled, "You are my life." My question (What is all this about?) had not reached her ear, and yet she certainly gave me an answer!

She spoke out, weeping, “My son... you’re heading north, and if your paths drained, longing and nostalgia will revisit you! I beg you, come back southwards, towards the land and me.”

When I eventually turned around, she inhaled my smell and the dust that my heavy steps kicked up, then she repeated, “Leaving is like death!”

A long time ago, my grandfather said, “Through the battle of life, men are the ones who die, not the ones who live.” She escorted me as I was in horror: I am the only one left. Will I remain the one love of her giving heart?! Will I remain the only one to climb the tree and



the little wall?!

Pleasant dreams melt away; hunger is an old man in a palm frond ceiling, rattling its corners with coughing and pain, and I... I am going to leave so that I can live, and so that she can live too.

### **Years ago...**

My father left and went far away. He was weak; his strength did not last long against life, so he wanted to go out, be free, or – in other words – escape, as I heard he preferred to hide!

The Villagers asked, “Is his land barren? Or was his axe on his shoulder as he stood up and went out to search?”

They said, “He is in a very distant village,” and they said, “He is dead!”

My mother’s heart told her the very same thing, and it also confirmed, “He will never come back.”

Reality can slap you hard in the face, and sometimes it stands against the people who need to face it. The truth about my father is that he was crazy, as I heard people whispering on a previous night when my mother refused the offer of marrying her former love.

And when the husband’s days were taken from our earth, the wife, the owner of the bag, and I continued to mourn him with lasting memories.

### **Now...**

I remember on the night of the harvest; the birds of the sky bore the smile of our house. Khaled went missing, so his mother cried out in silence, shouting for the scent of him, and mourning those moments. At that time, there was nothing left of Khaled's scent but this bag, which my beloved mother refused but to stab it with my glare every now and then. I hope that I return quickly and do not go missing far away or in the city."

### **Early Today...**

Before my disappearance, longing led me back. I saw the village, which was afraid of the fangs of the city, and I saw the palm fronds around the wall and a tree under which stood

the ghost of the last farewell.

**The wall:** made of clay. The foundation grew around our house on the first day I came into this world. It has swallowed up so many years, and still drinks the rain – drinks it, standing up without getting wet.

**The tree:** its head poked through the width of the wall, then reached for the sky until it had matured and become tall.

The tree was leafy at times, and it becomes bare when it is sad. I have climbed it ever since its early branches, and since the early youth of the wall. My Childhood – I couldn't possibly show you all its pictures, only a few of them are with my mother and with this house of mine;

a bit of nostalgia was missing because I, myself, have put everything far behind me. Any remaining nostalgia I have was stuck in my left hand. I still have about an hour, otherwise the plane will depart without me. Will some cash be enough for them?

Airport 30Km

I read this quite easily. The taxi driver must have heard my mother's warning, as his slowness preyed on my patience to such an extent that it almost came to an end, yet I didn't want to shout at him.

I finally reached the departure desk and asked, "Can I travel to ...?"

The employee answered me in anger, "Put your name down on the waiting list!"

It was a wonderful morning from the village to the airport, I remember that.

Then, afterwards, the night was still...

Leaning against the mud wall from the outside, as the air rustled the branches of the tree, I remembered the day's events and some memories of the past...

**Today...**

The bird roared and carried everyone but the one who did not have the travel expense.

**After sunset...**

Layla said, "Nights' dates scare me, as does our meeting." I said nothing, my thoughts were far away. But she brought me back to my senses with her Arabian jasmine smell when ap-

proached me, wondering, what happened; what is this bag? And why all this luggage?

**Now...**

Near the wall – from the inside – under the tree, in the light of the faint lantern, my mother is counting the amount she needs to buy a bag of corn tomorrow. I listen a little. I am making the wall, tree and light of the lantern damp with tears which slowly trickle from my eyes. I move my feet towards the house; I need to cry. My mother's kisses run over my body; she buries her face in my chest as if the traveller has finally returned from his long absence, and he no longer became the misfortune during the day and the lover during the night!

Let all fear fall away; the wind will not matter

under the palm frond ceiling any longer. While you are alone, shaking behind the door.

**Tomorrow...**

My feet will make great strides make great footprints on the ground towards a good life. And you will live with me in the little mother-land.