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هيئة الأدب والنشر والترجمة
Literature, Publishing & Translation Commission

Saudi Tales

By Saudi writers

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Dolphins

“Omayma Alkhamis”

In the newspaper, there was a small square advertisement for a park on the edges of the desert that was going to host a dolphin show. The ocean breeze filled my lungs, the seafoam splashed into my face and the stream of salt was scattered over the pale afternoon. My sitting room was filled with dolphins' whistles and seagulls' squawking.

“*Oh, dolphins...*”, their smooth silver skin, their giggles and clapping flippers, slipping through the waves' foam and sliding back and forth with the tides, using their fins that have, over

time, grown sea snails and seashells.

I ran quickly to my husband and told him, “Wouldn’t it be great if we went there for the weekend? Instead of gazing in weary darkness inside a restaurant, surrounded by walls and curtains, and finding people’s chatter – leftover and forgotten– at our table so that it hovers like smoke as we’re sitting and I can no longer see you.”

“But now... our souls will be able to dive with the waves of dolphins. Then, we could buy pastries and eat them while drinking cups of tea on the edge of the desert.”

When we arrived there, we found nothing exceptional about the place, nothing different from the other parks that have

sprung up on the *Thumama* dunes. Cement walls surrounded some scattered chambers and yellow grass neighboured meandering passages. Nothing indicated a dolphins' pod or the seafoam. The lazy atmosphere and the workers' footsteps led towards an abdication of their duties, the dark brown spots all over their bodies; they could have told us where to find the dolphins' sea.

They pointed to a closed, windowless, rectangular building with a long crack in its eastern wall. It looked like an enormous garage. It was painted in two colours; the overlying colour was white, while the underneath had perhaps once been blue. We stepped into the building

via steel stairs that led us to a rusty gate which opened to a large pool surrounded by three unpainted steel amphitheatres. I felt that the person who had made these must have been the one who had made the gate's stairs too.

The smell of chlorine was pungent throughout the place; it reminded me of swimming pools and it unleashed my desire to jump in and get wet; but we were stopped just a few steps from the rusty gate by a rusty man as well, his lips twisted like a worn rope and his teeth covered by thin yellow lines. He pointed to the women's seats on the amphitheatres. And, without speaking, he lifted his chin to point my husband to the op-

posite side where the men were seated. Our kids didn't care about the seating so much; they were waiting for the dolphins to splash us with water.

I slid my hand from my husband's hand and headed to my seat and did not turn back. I was afraid to flee and retreat. The sound of water filter machines was roaring around me, and the fluorescent lights were reflected on the water which appeared like a dark blue smudge.

There were only a few women around me in the amphitheatres, watching the scene numbly from behind the tranquility of their face veils, their children rustling their annoying crisp bags. I felt lonely, so I started waving back and

forth to children sitting on the opposite bank. I could barely hear the giggles of two dolphins at the far end of the water basin. The dolphins did not care for the show as much as they were eager to get the little fish waved by the blond trainer

The show was long, and I felt tired and looked up to the roof; there were caravans, tents and hills. I did not realise then that one of the dolphins had snuck out from the pool due to this trainer's carelessness, and it grew limbs and then turned into a great camel that drank all the water from the pool, then went on into the dunes of *Thumama*, its stomach shivering with water. And when the pool was empty, I found that there was

no reason to stay, and I looked for the women's exit door to escape from that park on the edge of the desert.

Hanging on the Locust

“Saaed Al-Khamisi”

The people of the *Umm al-Hama* border recently succeeded in convincing their youngsters of the return of *Awad* who had passed away. They had convinced them that a big locust had come, responding to their friend's call, and had then flown with him into the sky, swearing that he would certainly return soon because coming back is absolutely typical behaviour of locusts. Ever since that white lie, their eyes were peeled for everything that crossed the expanse of their playgrounds, the stars and the birds. *Awad* had a healing smile. It was so contagious that his

friends would laugh till the end of the day; he smiled even in the middle of a dispute, a smile that he drew from the vastness of the plains lying around their tents.

Awad, who loved birds, has left the children a skilful storyteller with every bird that landed on a branch of a tree near them. His friends eagerly gathered around him, listening to him and wondering about the birds' journeys and the secrets behind their different shapes and colours. He told them invented stories, that were made out of the silence in the distance. A long time has passed since *Awad* roamed, yet he was still present in the distant sky.

Here was a childhood that met and await-

ed everything that passed through their sky and fell silent before justifying the certainty.

Today, their childhood has wisened up a bit to the locust deception; so they gather to perform the ritual. They believe in that law. And they have been waiting for '*an-a-way Awad*'. People do not hope for his return, rather, it is hoped that whatever hovers in the sky will send him a farewell wave on their behalf.

Ideas on How to Come-up with a Charge

“Daif Fahad”

“Stand-up!”

After he opened the door, and with one strike I fell into the middle of the room. “Stand-up!” he said, firmly and roughly like a rock. I stood-up and then followed him through the long corridor leading to the investigation room.

I was not told to follow him, he did not need to tell me; on the one hand, he was keen not to waste his time on such unnegotiable things. On the other hand, we, together, have been there before, and we are now fully aware of what

pushed him – being a bit old anyway – to leave his office, or the cup of tea he was drinking, or end his call with his wife, a call to remind him about things he mustn't forget, or any other reason that would make him forget about me. This led him to set aside any of these matters and come to my damp cell; a typical cell as anyone would ever imagine.

I was now walking along this corridor. Once again, I was not keen to count the times I had walked there; I do not have such an obsession. With all the lack of sense or understanding that controls me, I have not become one of those retarded people who try to prevent themselves from counting the ridiculous things surround-

ing them, counting the frequency of faraway gates closing and opening, counting bathroom tiles, iron bars on the windows, the times their guards appear and disappear, or learning their shift times. Going only with a free mind, I was eager to know, and ready to accept – as a result of my complete ignorance over where I find myself now – the surprises I will discover about myself... How bad was my past that it has led me here?

I was waiting for the writer to justify the causes, and to make it convincing and acceptable, for me first. For I have to emphasise the importance of treating me with dignity, or at least in a decent manner, even if the opening scene of this

strange life is the kind of image that does not leave a good impression or hasn't been convincing to you. The last thing that someone wants to do is to waste his time going through a trivial story, or he could do it, but through a story that has nothing to do with my life.

We crossed the corridor, this kind soldier and I; he was humanely slow, partly because he had no other choice. He knocked on the door and then opened it, without waiting for a response. He hadn't forgotten the fact that no one should waste time on those irrefutable things. He grabbed the door, holding the handle, allowing me safe passage into the room, trying to make his stomach as flat as he could to avoid

any meaningless contact between us.

He pulled the door by its handle, which he was careful not to drop so that he would not lose more time, returning to grab it again to close it on me and the investigator who had called for me.

I know those eyes. Whoever writes my story now does not know the distinctive eyes of the investigators. The eyes that have lost their innate gaze. He does not know that the look the investigator gave me was a fake one and that his original look – the perspective that characterises every human being like a fingerprint – has been lost forever. He couldn't even remember how to look at his children with it anymore, nor

at his friends, nor even at people passing by in the street. As a result of the nature of his work, he had replaced his looks with these artificial looks that attempt to give an initial impression of control, understanding and discovery.

I consciously fell into these false looks, which were undoubtedly refined by experience and constant use. I tried with all my power to pretend and to show the extent of the confusion and exposure I felt, and that I was a person who could no longer deny, precisely deny what I never knew up till now. The one who writes my story – who placed me in this scene – did not offer to give me even the first hint. Just a little hint that would have helped to demonstrate

what I'm trying to juggle – to satisfy the ego of the looks of this investigator – to make it more convincing.

But what if my friend, who made all of this up, didn't yet know what I'd been accused of – which I am not allowed to attempt to deny – which triggered that investigator's false look. This unfortunate investigator and I will become two points joining together on the circumference of an endless circle, him looking at me to confess and put an end to this mystery. Meanwhile, because of these looks I will be completely willing to admit things that initially I didn't know, in the most firm and doubtful way.

Legends of the House

“Dhafer Al-Jabiri”

She came to a new country. Like any human being, her name would be the distinguishing sign of her existence. She had no choice; it would accompany her breath and her steps wherever she went. The family greeted her with astonishment. They could not get used to pronouncing her name and did not know what it meant, so they called her Erwas!

In her early days, no one asked her about its meaning, the family focused on her work more than anything else. Once, the man heard her pronounce her name ‘*Eros*’, and he called her by

it. Yet the housewife picked up on the change, and she was not satisfied with that. She said what she thought about his tone when he called for the veiled Asian lady.

Delving into his pockets and mobile phones, she looked over 'the global network'. She did not tire of the long research that led her finally to the battlefield of Greek mythology. She continued the search and drawn in by the mudds of doubt, and kept questioning the squearls of the republic; then said, "*It seems to me that you're hiding something behind changing her name!*"

He denied the accusation and saw the myth of trust falling apart. In a first attempt, he bought lots of 'attention' from the 'precaution market',

and he found himself ending up with ‘counterfeit merchandise’. But to get some peace of mind, he changed the name to “*Ross*” and, over time, the new name was distorted spontaneously and unintentionally, to settle on “*Rose*”.

“*Aww! ... Rose! Why would you call her a rose!*” the housewife cried.

He decided to abandon the names and change them to, perhaps, something easier. Should he call the lady after the name of her father, for instance, “*O daughter of Abdulrahman*”? Perhaps, if he did, suspicions would sneak into the heart of the same apprehensive woman, and she would say again that by calling her this he was trying to exalt and endear her.

One dry day, he came into the house and found no one replying to his greetings and, because he needed tea and water, he decided to call her:

*'O'Ghulam! .. Boy!'*¹

He said it, holding back a smile. Yet, the worker who was drowning in cleaning the dishes did not answer. She did not understand anything and did not pay any attention, but the lady and the girls quickly ran to him and said with one voice, "*Shame on you! Don't play around with her name and disrespect her!*"

The man of the house felt as if this matter was an endless maze. *How had no one thought about this strange being? The ongoing struggle*

1- Ghulam (Singular), or Ghilman (Plural), refers to young boys of slave-servent in Arabian history.

around her name without coming to any conclusion. The thought dominated him to the point that he reached a nonsense possibility, due to the ever-present suspicion flying in the air. He thought deeply: perhaps soon she will read about the Ghilman in the Abbasid era, and doubts will play on the mistress of the house again. Then, it will only remain for the worker to travel before the end of her contract; and her work, miraculously, will no longer be needed. Or perhaps the lady of suspicion will choose for the worker a non-suspicious name of her choice.

Features

“Abdul Wahid Yahyai”

When I first met Abu Bader, he was in his seventies. I met him at the house of one of my friend's fathers. His face was white, with no moustache or beard, and with two slim eyebrows, which he drew on in two fine lines with a pencil. I loved him as a man who was fond of documenting people, ideas and things. He listened carefully to pick up words and observe and write all the men's tales in his small notebook. He never failed to stop the speakers, asking them to slow down while speaking so that he would not miss a word, or to enquire about

a part he did not understand. We were in my friend's father's sitting room, describing how Abu Bader looked.

'Abu Bader strips naked just like all people do while showering, but with a difference: Abu Bader holds the new five-blade razor to start shaving from the top of his head down to his toes, passing over his head, eyebrows, face, chest, intimate areas and his legs.'

I did not ask my friend about the source of his information, perhaps it was a guess, not a fact. But whoever saw Abu Bader's head realised immediately that his relationship with hair was never a friendly one. It was not like his relationship with poetry, where he was keen

to memorise many verses by reading or hearing them directly from others.

He was a religious man who hardly missed a single prayer in the neighbourhood mosque: in the first row and directly behind the *Imam* if possible, with that ability the elderly have to criticise the *Imam* and correct his reciting mistakes, even when there were no real errors.

Once, in the presence of the worshippers, he said, directing his speech to the *Imam* after a prayer in which the *Imam* prostrated himself for forgetting prostration..

“O Sheikh, from the torment of my long life and at this age I had to pray behind an ignorant person like you... Your Virtue”, he said with obvious sar-

casm. He would not miss a chance to criticise the Imam, both socially or religiously, if he were to sit with his close friends. He once laughed sarcastically when he saw an elderly woman asking the ‘owner of virtue’ to read and blow out his saliva into a bottle of water and read healing supplications in search of the blessing, and he said to her, *“It would be better if he does that to himself; he may succeed at something!”*

After that, I met him on different occasions and I sometimes stood to greet him while he was walking on the road, leaning on his stick. I saw him for the last time on a cold spring day when he was standing on a side road, surrounded by houses on both sides. He was standing

with a man who was comforting him after an assault he had gone through two days earlier.

The two brothers who allegedly beat him claimed that Abu Bader had asked to marry their twenty-year-old sister, and had even flirted with her beauty, brazenly in front of them, claiming that she loved him. As we stood on the pavement, Abu Bader explained to me the story of the assault in a cheerful voice, and he showed me a bruise on his head and a ruby red mark on his knee.

He continued, *“I swear the girl loves me! She is in love with my intelligence, but her brothers are bastards and I will report them.”*

Another man, hearing the story, said, *“She is*

mocking you, uncle; she is the age of your granddaughters, how could she love you?!”

But Abu Bader was not convinced. He did not like being addressed as ‘uncle’, and in addition to that, pointing out that the fiancée was the age of his granddaughters changed the features of his face. He insisted he would report them to the police, even if his girlfriend would not like it, because ‘his honour’ – as he said – was more important than his love.

I did not follow the story and did not care about it then. What I know is that Abu Bader died, months after his proposal, frailer due to health problems unrelated to the beating incident.

Neem Tree

“Amr Al Ameri”

My father didn't use to consult my mother in anything, not because he was despotic or dictatorial; this is just how men used to be. Women accepted this, and so life used to go on. One time, he called her and spoke to her while he stared at the ground or looked into the distance, except to look at her face, *“The children are growing up and the house is getting smaller. We need to expand and build an additional room.”*

“May Allah give you the strength, that has been my hope for a long time.” she replied.

Then, she tried to walk away to finish her

'loaded' chores, but he said, "*Where would we build it? The place is small, and we will need to cut the Neem tree and build over it.*"

She stared at him with dismay and said,

"No! Please build it anywhere, don't cut the tree! You know how our house, our lives, our afternoons and our naps would be without it! It is better than a thousand rooms."

Once again, she tried to walk but he interrupted her again. "*I have thought about this a lot; the tree is in the middle of the yard, and the place for the room will not be suitable unless we cut it and build over it.*"

"Whatever you say."

This time, she went without looking back;

she went to hang the laundry on the rope tied between the Neem tree and a nail hammered into a distant wall.

She knew that he had made his decision, and her opinion would not make a difference, yet it was confusing that he had consulted her for the first time.

May it be for the best, she thought.

So she mumbled while going back to work. She kept her eyes on him while he was still standing, confused, with his eyes looking at every corner of the place, at the noisy tree with the sounds of birds, before leaving for his business. After he left, she pulled the small stool under the tree and pondered it as if she was seeing

it for the first time, or the last time.

She was remembering the tree that her husband had brought for her in the early days of their lives in their home. It was a strange tree compared with the trees they used to see. Neem trees were not known in the area at the time. In fact, she thought it was a kind of vegetable at first. But the tree soon grew and the shadow beneath it was large enough to hold two people to sit in the noon sun, and a place for children to play after they had grown up, the birds began to live there. The days passed, and this tree became the focus of everything in the family day. They ate under it, and it became their house's landmark for strangers who came to see them

for the first time.

“Yes, yes... The house that has a Neem tree.”

“Yes... there is no other house with a Neem tree.”

Some people came to pick leaves from its branches to boil and drink its juice after news spread that it was a cure for diabetics. Some girls even came and collected leaves to make face masks or hair-lengthening remedies. Our father also hung a swing for us over this tree that we occupied every day, all day long. When I grew a little and fell in love for the first time, I engraved her initial on one of its boughs, in a foreign language as a precaution. It was a dull letter that disappeared over time.

The weather got hotter and the shade reced-

ed so that it remained only at the foot of the tree. My mother finished some of her work and returned to pull the small stool under the shade after I had shaken the fallen leaves from it and she sat thinking:

What would she do if he (she never says his name) insisted on cutting down the tree? How would the house look without it? Would she grow another tree? A tree in a far corner that does not crowd the place. But are there any days remaining in life to plant and wait for a tree?!

She forgot about it while caught up in housework and the children playing, and sometimes I tried to study close to it, but my mind was distracted by a bird building its nest with another

bird, and I had not heard their discussion about the tree.

However, she surprised me with a question.

“Would you plant another tree for your mother if your father insisted on cutting down this one?”

“Cut it down? Why?”

“He says he wants to expand the house; he says it is getting smaller.”

“The house hasn’t got smaller, my father’s money has increased... that’s all...”

“That’s my opinion too, but I know he is stubborn. The important thing is whether you would plant another tree for your mother if he cut it down?”

I stared at her face and there was a tear falling.

“Starting from tomorrow, I am going to plant plenty of trees for you, not just one.”

“No, it is not from tomorrow and not here, but at your home, after you become a man and you get your own house.”

This time, the tear fell, even though she tried to wipe it and hide it from me, and I went back to looking at the birds. She was staring at the tree, listening to the whims of the branches that the wind blew.

In the evening, a strong wind blew, bringing down many leaves of the Neem tree, and in the evening the birds did not roost as they used to

do in the tree. In the morning, a woodcutter cut down the tree. There were firm rumours in the village at this time, rumours that my father would marry a new woman as soon as the new large room was finished. The room that would occupy the place of the Neem tree that was planted in the ground.

The Hole's Memory

“Fahad Al Ateeq”

When their street bade farewell to the last breath of the sunset, they used to play barefoot in the lane and overlooked the inhabitants of the shady houses with their colourful doors. They were not far from that everlasting hole; they hadn't seen a day without it. Suddenly, they heard a small cry as a child was spotted falling in the hole which looked like an old well. It was a moment steeped in dark childish amazement. At that horrific moment, the child was screaming loudly from his small chest, and was perhaps releasing his last breath.

The whole thing was truly terrifying. There was a large crowd coming from the city market towards their homes. People stopped and stared at the dark hole that had swallowed the child. From a distance, a man watched the scene with panic as if his foot had been tied to an electric wire, shivering and sweating. He looked as if he was in denial that a human being could fall into a hole and be swallowed by eternal darkness.

The days passed, and he tried to forget what happened, to no avail. He tried to escape by studying and playing. But lots of things always painted the image in his mind, and he would sometimes get a mysterious feeling that he was the one who had fallen into that hole. He would

sometimes act on this basis, as if he was that child who had fallen. He even once dreamed that the hole was expanding and expanding, swallowing everything in its way... towards more people until it became wide enough to eat their entire neighbourhood.

Later, he discovered that he had grown up and he moved to a new neighbourhood where new neighbours purchased beautiful and colourful cars. They wore white clothes, perfumed their clothes and left their homes, then they set off for the streets of the city. Then he grew up once again, to realise that they were all walking in the opposite direction.

On the Girl in the Opposite House

“Hind Al Gharib”

I was sitting on the pavement next to her. She said, *“We will not see the world as it is unless we stop lying, we must be more courageous!”*

I nodded my head, bored, and agreed, *“We must be really brave!”*

Thinking of the window of the house that overlooks my most significant and most delicious secrets, I asked her, “When was the last time you acted bravely?”

She said, *“Every day, I behave as an integral part of the world, showing perfection...”*

When she mentioned perfection, her voice

was absent in the vacuum of the street, and I clearly imagined the window of my house glowing with a single light, sitting underneath my neighbour in the house across the street.

He used to open his window every morning at seven o'clock, to practise light sport, while I was on the opposite side, usually dragging my feet from the bed to the wardrobe, and then to the kitchen, where, in a hurry I would drink two cups of water after I had had nightmares all night. I would pick out clothes randomly and run away from home, leaving behind a gloom that the sun does not clear, and I would head towards unplanned and inevitably catastrophic days.

As for my neighbour, he used to quietly bend in front of the seedlings of his flowers to water them while muttering a song. I never managed to catch the words of the song, nor did I succeed in estimating his age. Sometimes he appeared to be in his forties and sometimes much younger. Sometimes I stayed behind the window to watch him for few minutes, when he stopped exercising to wipe the sweat off his forehead and neck, and to lift his locks of hair that cast a shadow over his eyes.

One morning, while I was out of breath because I was tense and late as usual, he was also breathless from his morning activity, but he noticed me as I was standing in front of the open

window stuffing my bag with meaningless papers, and in the middle of this breathless moment he said a single word, “Hello!”

I stared for a moment and smiled, then closed the window and pulled the blind down, feeling foolish.

“Hey, where did you go?!”, my friend asked.

I said, *“I was thinking to what extent a person can be brave.”*

She opened her arms wide and said, *“Our capabilities are greater than you think!”*

I nodded my head, emotionally this time, and my memory returned to my neighbour, whose name I do not know. I had watched and tracked his details for a long time: I saw him in the af-

ternoon eating lunch compassionately as a poet, I observed every movement to learn from it, I brought a knife and a fork and sat in front of the window, training for the way in which I would eat with him when he called me for lunch one day. I tried to catch the names of books on the top shelf of his library... It was his favourite shelf that he turned to at night. I looked for it and read some of them, and I imagined the kind of delicious conversations that would take place between us when he opened his door to me instead of his window, and revealed to me his favourite books and parts of his souls.

I became fond of him without getting a step closer to his door from mine; the only thing I

had left of him was a little spell: *"Hello!"*

My life became related to his lights, which turned off at half-past midnight and, when he slept, I didn't. I turned on the first music track that had ever come from his house and danced, danced, danced around in circles.

Her voice brought me back to the cold pavement. "You should give it a try! Come on, get up and be goofy; no one will see you except me, but I will still consider it a brave act, come on!"

I jumped out and ran to the middle of the street and said, *"Watch me!"*

I screamed loudly and then started groaning like a wounded wolf, and finally I felt that I was getting back parts of me. I looked at her and she

was unhappy with my trivial courage and said,
“Less than expected!”

I thought... but, as a person I have always been less than expected, nothing new there! I put my hand up in front of her, and said, “Objection! This is the world’s worst conversation! I am leaving.” I walked without looking back, even though I was curious about whether she was proud of me now. I went home and slept; I did not think much, but felt that things were running their normal course, the agitated body had to calm down quietly.

I woke up in the morning hearing a loud noise outside and, with difficulty, I pulled my head and dreams out of bed and I headed towards

the main window to find three men exiting my neighbour's house carrying everything: a green velvet sofa, library books, room lamp, the wardrobe and many boxes and things I had never seen before... They were taking everything out of the house while my neighbour was standing there, ending a call and opening his car door.

Three men carried everything and did not notice a kiss that had fallen in the shoebox, and a delicate dance in the clothes. They could not carry away the many hugs that had never happened, and they did not find the stories hidden in the curtains that never once closed in my face.

I had to prove my courage at that moment

and pretend that nothing was changing in front of me and that my heart was solid and would not be broken. I opened the door without paying attention to my appearance this time, and I stood on the doorstep to contemplate the time wasted on nights that had wounded my body.

For the first time, my neighbour was ‘a plastic thing’ and ‘a lie’. I did not feel that he was mine while he swept his hair from his forehead and put the mobile phone in his pocket. He behaved as if he was a very old-fashioned robot until he barely moved, and suddenly his small movements became very slow. I froze while a whole lifetime overlapped one over the other. He did not raise his eyes to see the girl who had mem-

orised him by heart from behind pale glass.

I understood that he was leaving and that these people were helping him to leave and that he would not take me with him, and that a kiss on his neck would fall to the ground without making a sound... I did not realise, until someone told me, that the men had finished their work, while he was shaking part of a melody off his trousers, "We apologise for this inconvenience."

"Is it all over?" I asked.

He replied, *"Yes, it is over, and it will not happen again."*

I entered the house and quietly closed the door. My feet took me directly to the window, a

spot that I had always loved. I quietly stood as if I were remembering an ancient glory. At that moment, his house was wider than my heart and free of the furniture that I had once considered my friend. I tried to defeat my tears with weak weapons. I wasn't the right girl in his life, and why would he notice a girl like me? What do I have to offer? I was helpless, overwhelmed by hope and destroyed by desire.

It was while I was whipping myself up like this, that I first noticed, on the wall of his room, there was a long and narrow mirror; I had not noticed it before. I was visible in it! I waved my hands and said in a low voice, "*Hello!*"

I watched my mouth saying words over and

over, then I repeated the greeting and said a few other words, and so I got to know my own sweet mouth. I turned around and then flapped my arms like a dove, showing that its wings were not damaged. A girl flew into the house opposite.

Used Days

“Wafa Al-Harbi”

We repeat ourselves terribly. Every day I wake up at 4 a.m. to pray, prepare breakfast, wake up the kids and watch them chew food slowly, put on their clothes and check their shirt buttons before I follow them up to the street corner which swallows the school bus.

Am I prickly? Do I have bumps and spines like hedgehogs that prevent people from getting close to me? None of my children has ever embraced me or told me, *‘Thank you, mum, for being a part of our lives’*. I have never heard a word from them indicating that they love me.

Even when they are trying to persuade me to agree to something that they desperately want. I have a phobia of going out, all my days are used, and it repeats itself over and over again.

But whenever boredom tries to warn me, the children come back from their schools and I start working. It's lunchtime, then dinner, then someone – in a secret spot behind the clock – presses the “Restart Today” button, and if he forgets to change the name of the day from Sunday to Monday, I will discover that I am running in a circle called Day, not Week.

Once, I decided to break the routine: no lunch for the day. I predicted a problem that might spice up our boring life. I was expecting

them to get angry, or think that I might be ill, for instance, and ask about me.

I would feel at least that I was occupying a space in their lives. But they and their father didn't care, they bathed and slept. I was alone that day for longer than ever before. The desire to stop the recurrence of my days became stronger.

On Sunday or Tuesday, the names aren't important anyway, I wrote them a letter saying that I could no longer bear life with them.

My youngest son was the first to return, he found the letter on the dining table; he read it and did not understand! He looked for me all over the house, calling my name in a loud,

choked voice. And when he did not find me, he sat on the doorstep, waiting for the rest of them to return, while crying with the dismay of a child I did not recognise, as if he had never felt safe except in the arms of his mother.

When his father and siblings came, he cried and told them about my disappearance. They were shocked and shouted and talked among themselves in fear. I even wondered, *is there anything else they feared other than me abandoning them?*

They asked the neighbours about me, and they reported my disappearance to the police. No one thought to look for me in the pantry in the corner of the kitchen. I was sitting with my

feet stretched out, leaning my back on a shelf of cans with my head on the second shelf.

The knife with which my arteries were cut was the last thing I worried about. Who would wash it? I had finished all the housework before I did it. Yet, the dust gathered under the shelf... How did I not notice and clean it before?! Until my last breath I was thinking about them and my house's tidiness and – had it not been for the spread of blood that took so long to cross under the door to alert them before it was too late – I would now be among them, preparing to repeat my days.

I could not hear them sobbing at night in their beds; I could not see their father looking

through the family album pages and staring longingly at my photos.

There is no longer any room to return; a mother who goes to heaven never comes back.

Eternal Yet Extinct Chess Games

“Tariq Al-Jarid”

Preface

The idea of chess first appeared five thousand years ago. Few ideas have enough coherent logic to last this long. The first move in the game holds twenty possibilities. The first two moves in the game hold four hundred possibilities, then they explode, and the odds exceed the number of stars in the universe. When you look at a chessboard – which is no longer than an arm – for the first time, you cannot imagine that sixty-four square spaces are able to accommodate the possibilities of the magnitude of repercussions within the big cosmic explosion, and

that they expand to complex sites such as the positions of the stars in the sky.

Human achievement can be imagined throughout history, from architecture and art to poetry, philosophy and mathematics, like chess matches. Some of these are monotonous and boringly repeated like the chores of natural numbers, some are probable and possible, but did not occur like imaginary numbers, and some of these games are trivial, shallow, and unimaginative and inappropriate for eternity. Some of it is deep, creative and breathtaking and engraved in books and in the human imagination. Some of it is deep, creative and breathtaking, worthy of immortality, and yet it has ceased to exist like

an ancient and submerged civilisation such as Atlantis.

Each chess game has an opening, a middle and an ending. In other words, we can look at life in the same way. In the opening: there are moves you make to find your way in the world as you do in chess, and there are moves that come to you, over which you have no control, and divert your direction.

Your position towards the chessboard, the colour of your pawns, the nature of your opponent and the time you have got all have an impact on your chances in the match; it's equivalent to how your birthplace, your race, the nature of your parents and your age affects your

chances in life.

In the *opening move*, you can play a sloppy person who trips in his steps. You can start your moves as if you had learnt them from a book or a chess master. Chess possibilities are like the roads that humans have walked on before, known and familiar. Some of us are born into this world with a map in our hands and guided by a navigator. And some of us are left alone to chart our own path and learn that some ways are brutal, scary or bumpy.

Magic, deception and sleight of hand happen here, in *the middle of the game*. You lose the innocence and simplicity of the opening, and the world and options get more complicated,

and your opponent's manoeuvres become even more serious. Here, you will gain experience, and you will understand consequences and repercussions. Every move you play, and every step you take, becomes like gambling, with consequences for your success in life and your failure.

The *ending* is irrefutable. You will either regret the steps you have taken, or you will just accept them, or you will act surprised over the consequences and defeat certainty, or you will accept the inevitable. However, I think I started talking about one thing and have ended up talking about something else. In fact, I was talking about the stages of the chess match.

It is said that a talented chess master can visualise twenty-three steps in advance, and he can often predict the end, or rather his end of that dimension which was not possible to see at the start of the game. The chess master is not certain of anything at the beginning of any game except for the opening, and only when his first steps are documented can he then guess his future in the game, and his chances.

He might discover in the middle of it that he is on his way to seal it in his favour, or that his path is blocked and to save his dignity he makes an offer to tie or acknowledges defeat and withdraws before he is humiliated. It is inappropriate and unwise of a chess master to put

himself and his king at a definite end like that.

This text, or rather the text string, is going to hold a match played by a chess master. All I am confident about is the opening, and I already know my steps. But I am not sure of what follows, and I have brought along a charming and seductive middle game that leads you to an exotic road, where I have become lost and distracted. And I may hope until I reach the end, and I may lose my breath in the middle, so I'm going to give up before I end up writing inappropriate things, and end up on a monotonous road with you. Perfectly befitting a chess master, he spares himself and his cohorts that troubled ending.

مباراة الملك الضليل

ولاعبُّها الشُّطرنجَ خَيْلى تَرادفت
ورُحى عَلَيْها دارَ بالشاهِ بالعَجَلِ
فَقالت وما هَذا شَطارةٌ لَعبِ
ولكن قَتَلَ الشَّاهِ بالفيلِ هُوَ الأَجَلِ
فَناصَبْتُها مَنصُوبَ بالفيلِ عَاجِلا
مِن اثْنينِ فِي تَسعِ بِسُرعِ فَلَم أَمَلْ
وقَد كانَ لَعبِي كُلِّ دَسِّ بِقُبلةِ
أَقبَلُ نَعراً كَالهلالِ إِذا أَفَلْ
فَقَبَلْتُها تِسعاً وتِسعينَ قُبلةً
وواحدةً أُخرى وَكُنْتُ عَلى عَجَلِ

«امرؤ القيس»

The Exiled King Match

Imru' AlQays is describing his pleasant time playing chess with his beloved. His Knights have raced and gone forward to take her Bishop. "You are not a savvy player," his beloved said. "The game ends only by capturing the King!", whereby she indicated that we should wait till the end to see who wins this game. Yet, he kept manoeuvring his Pawns back and forth without getting tired or bored. With every defeat, he kissed her lips that looked like a crescent moon at nightfall. He rapidly gave her ninety-nine kisses and one more.

It is easy to assume that Imru' Al-Qays learnt how to play chess in Ankara. It is unlikely that the Arab, who has lived a life as intense and austere as in the Arabian Peninsula would carry chess pieces and a board with him wherever he goes. Perhaps it is more likely that he would carry dice in the same bag that carries dates, to gamble with his friends – or even the elves – if he ever felt lonely in the desert. It is easy to assume that Imru' Al-Qays went to Ankara to seek help from its palace, Justinine, over the oppression of the King of Alherah. It is easy to assume that his disagreement with the King of Hearah Al-Mundhir Ibn Maa' Alsama' was nothing but a struggle between Kesra of Persia

and Caesar of the Romans with Arab swords, and that the anger of Ibn Maa' Alsama' was nothing but a wave of Persian anger. It is easy to assume that the poet who spent his youth travelling with the Saaliks, and sharing insanity, wine and gambling with them, had found time to be infatuated with chess while he was seeking to regain his kingdom and that he died of smallpox sores on his way back from Ankara to recover this lands.

The narrators and storytellers have distorted Imru' Al-Qays' adventures. In my opinion, calling him 'The Exiled King', is nothing but their intention to delude and deceive. It is quite possible that *Thu al-Qaroh* The One with Sores

– the other title of Imru' Al-Qays – died of smallpox on his way to Ankara and not on his return from there.

It is more likely that if he had never escaped from the *Al-Hirah's* king, he would not have needed to seek help from Caesar, and that he had never heard of chess – that these verses were purely intended to amuse the caliphs who learnt chess from a distance, and that a poet named Imru' Al-Qays did not exist... or so I thought! The last thing I expected was to find the answer to the secret of these alien verses written by an ignorant poet, one thousand five hundred years after his death, in London!

All I wanted was to hide from the rain.

When I escaped into “*The Knight’s Bar*”, the barman was arranging the cups and wiping the espresso machine.

“You came early; you will not have anyone to play with now.”

I did not understand what he meant, but I smiled shyly, *“I am looking for warmth... Can I order a latte?”* The barman said, looking at my shirt, *“I can see that... well... pick a table and I’ll prepare your coffee.”*

I started looking at tables, searching for a place away from the cold draught. It was a ‘chess bar’, so I realised as I looked at a huge knight piece in front of me. There were antiques and books related to chess and its history distribut-

ed and hung around the edges of the bar, and each table was a chessboard, so I picked the most distant and most isolated board. The barman noticed me walking through the antiques and pausing at each to read the historical summary under it before I took my seat. He asked me while he put the latte on my table if I was playing, so I nodded yes, trying to fabricate a conversation (with a bit of pride), *“I’m surprised that Paul Murphy has passed through here.”*

“The pub was able to keep the board you are referring to. He played on it during his trip to Europe a hundred and fifty years ago.”

As I expected, this was the beginning of a short but interesting conversation about the his-

tory of the pub and the history of chess, about the playing times and customers, about my purpose in London and his purpose of working in the pub, then about our hometowns.

Then his eyes glowed. *“I think someone with your background could help me understand what era this chess match took place in?”*

He then brought me a book of antiques that the pub kept.

The book appeared to be from a used bookshop, its cheap leather was worn out and its corners had lost their sharpness. The right-hand pages of the book had a symbolic plan of a chess match – at a crucial moment – with the global coding of its movements, and the left-hand

pages were a historical summary of the match and its players.

Perhaps it was closer to an educational calendar on the history of chess and the way it is played. The text was written in Russian and had no margins or references, and I think it was one of the books that the Soviet Union published and distributed to chess clubs in every city and village in the area.

The barman told me that one of the pub's visitors had left it here. He was an older Russian who no longer came to the pub. But, whenever he passed, he sat with the barman, or the owner of the bar, or one of the customers, studying the game's movements on the table together, while

the Russian man translated and explained the historical background behind it.

Pointing to a match in the book, the barman said that this short and incomplete match was believed to be the first documentation of the move of chess from Persia to Arabia, before moving with the Crusades to Europe.

The old Russian man had said that it took place between Ibn Malik al-Hirah and an Arab poet or a king – or perhaps a poet and a king. And that it took place in an oasis in the north of the desert of the island, and was thought to be before the advent of Muhammad, and that this was the reason for the poet getting lost in the desert.

I nodded to him to move the chess pieces as symbolised in the book, to perhaps understand what had happened.

When I saw the pieces moving on the chess-board, just as they had moved one thousand five hundred years ago, I saw everything. I saw the oasis; I saw the men and the young ladies sitting in circles whispering. As I walked towards them, their eyes looked around, not noticing me walking between them in the crowds to reach a carpet. On the carpet, sitting opposite each other, one of them, the Crown Prince Al-Mundhir Ibn Maa' Alsma', was teaching Imru' Al-Qays how to move chess pieces. The Prince invited him to play a match, and he accepted. The men

started rubbing their hands with excessive enthusiasm and poking each other to gamble on the fate of the game, and the girls dazzled and smiled at each other as they watched the players.

The Arabian kings did what any king would likely have done. They both put forward their bravest fighters to duel on the battlefield, to raise the enthusiasm of the crowds before the battle ignited.

Ibn al-Mundhir sent the pawn ahead to the middle of the board, and Imru' al-Qays responded by removing his pawn, which was countered. Then, Ibn al-Mundhir released his Bishop and then his Knight. As for the one

who once said “*To charge, retreat, and wheel*”², describing his mount, he took out his horses to meet the pawns.

Ibn al-Mundhir, or Ibn Maa’ Alisma’ as I will call him from now on, fortified his King well in the sides of his army. But our brave poet and Knight let his King lead the battle by manoeuvring his Knights from the heart of his army. I knew that Ibn Maa’ Alisma’ was draining Imru’ Al-Qays when he attacked him by moving the Knight again, in a move that Italians later called the ‘*Fegatello Attack*’.

Imru’ Al-Qays was obliged to manoeuvre the Knights and to attack his opponent’s King to defend himself. Whereas Ibn Maa’ AlSama’

2- The 53th verse of the Mu’allaqa of Imru’ al-Qays, translated by the late Prof. Ibrahim Almumaiz

continued his attack with his Queen, with the other Bishop, with Knights at times, and with the pawn at times, luring the King to the open board and chasing him alone, while his crowds stood paralysed behind him. Imru' Al-Qays' friends were frustrated by the insult to which his King was being subjected, whereas Ibn Maa' Alsama's friends did not hesitate to laugh and encourage girls to comment and smile. The fate of al-Qays in the game was clear, but he decided to continue playing stubbornly until the game stopped at the decisive moment in the book.

It seemed clear to us, the barman and I, even with a missing ending, that all that was left for Ibn Maa' Alsama' was to move his pawns and

put the King down. I saw him with my bare eyes almost reaching the chessboard, up until the moment when the shadow of Imru' Al-Qays was cast on the battlefield with a sword dripping blood onto the chess pieces, and onto the head of Ibn Maa' Alsama' saying, "*Checkmate!*"