

Sabah SANHOURI

### Isolation

It's hot, hot enough to suffocate. There is nothing except this table upon which I sleep, a rectangular hall with four doors and twelve windows. On each side a door. On the shorter sides, two windows, each with a door between them, and on the longer sides, two windows to the left of the door and two to the right.

The town is absolutely empty but for the sound of my thoughts straying from me to the point of anger. Alone I am in this hall, alone on the table, alone in the town, I, alone, the only one after whom death does not lust. I, alone, am stretched upon the table into which I have begun to sink, to blend, its wooden slats having nearly become the marrow of my bones. Rising requires a tremendous effort, much like a snake stripping itself of its skin. I struggle to rise. Where did I put the case? I wonder. It must be somewhere outside. The table is in the middle of the hall, so I leave through one of the doors on the longer side, as leaving through the shorter side would only double my effort.

It's as hot outside as inside. Ah, here, I think, is the case squatting by the door. I don't know where it came from. All I know is that, since I began to recover my senses, I've seen that case with its bottles of finely aged wine. Not that the wine has any effect. Nothing does, anymore. In my depths I had thought that perhaps some wine would bring about a desired effect, perhaps help me to remember something, anything. Perhaps, at the least, I would remember who I was. My name. Where I came from. Where the others have gone and who they might have been. It's hot, hot enough to suffocate, as if this plot of land were the only place where the sun was assigned to shine and the wind had reached the age of retirement and perhaps died. I grab a bottle of wine and begin to drink, then throw the bottle aside. I am still in my right mind. A thought occurs to me: perhaps I could look around town. I start to walk down the road. Where were the people? I wonder. How much I hoped that some living creature would appear in front of me, a person, an animal, tame or wild, no matter. Why am I alone here?

The town is still and soundless. The only thing I hear is the beating of my own heart. I enter one of the houses easily through an unlocked door. The house is a bit dark but it is still easy to see. What beautiful furniture it has! I glance over some pictures on the wall. They seem to be of a family. What a handsome young man, I think. And those people, are they his parents? It seems

so. Where are they now? I wonder. And suddenly I feel a chill run through me and decide to leave the house.

I continue walking down the road. The houses on both sides of the street appear to be completely still. Wait, I think, what is that over there? A windmill, how ironic! A windmill? It looks like they built it before the wind retired. Indeed, the wind must have worked here. Is there anyone inside? I sneak in and see a number of spiderwebs—and even they look abandoned. But where are the spiders? I spin around. There are a number of flour sacks and a container of unmilled grain. Someone must be here, I think. Yes, it is ridiculous to think that there is no one here, not a single person, not even a spider. Even a rat would be enough for me. I ask you, please, I will call out in my loudest voice and perhaps some people will wake up. But let me not be greedy. It's enough to ask for one person, a single person to awake. Fine, I will cry out . . . But oh my god. Can I not shout? Why will the words not come out? It would be enough if I could pronounce the letters one by one, but what language do I speak? I know I am able to speak, I am certain of it because I am always *thinking* in this language. Yet I speak only to myself and I do not speak to myself out loud. Is this because I am afraid that I will be called crazy or that I'm afraid someone will hear my secrets? How I wish they would call me crazy, just let them appear before me and call me crazy and I would be ecstatic.

Had I remembered that people eavesdrop on anyone who talks to himself so that they can gossip about him, I would have spoken in every language in the universe and in the loudest possible voice just to draw my fellow man. But there is no point to any of that now. I have lost my last hope, lost my voice for all eternity. What a loss. A voice draws people like honey attracts ants. What? Did I just say the word “honey”? Ah! I remember I saw honey in the house that I was just in, great, honey, ants, I found it, fine, I found it. I leave the windmill and sprint back to the house, open the door and rush inside trying to remember: where did I see it? Here it is. I take the honey and leave with it. It is closed tight but this is no problem for someone who has nearly lost hope when it reappears unexpectedly from far away. Naturally I am now stronger than a mountain, and here, the jar opens in my hands. I taste it—not bad. It still tastes like honey. I grab the jar and run back along the road, letting the honey spill over the side. It was almost gone but that was fine, the area I had covered would have to do.

Now I must await the ants, hoping they do not take too long. No, I would not have to wait long, for I know that those slender ants which have the strongest sense of smell in the whole colony

would smell the honey and inform the others. It would be only a few hours before I saw the ants. And when they arrived I would reach the height of happiness simply seeing another being: alive, small and beautiful. Finally I would be able to see life coursing through their legs. I must sit and wait. When the sun had almost set, the ants still had not appeared. No problem. I will wait. There is nothing to do but wait.

And wait. They will come. I know that ants cannot resist honey. And so I wait.

And when I had waited so long that the sun's daily work began to wane, I knew I could not wait any longer. I would return to the table for which I longed. It is unusual for me to spend a night far from it to the point that I feel sores along my back that resembled precisely the lesions of an amputee. I do not lose the way back home. Finally my table. I attempt to embrace it, to hug each of its four sides and kiss them, and then I do the only thing I know how to do: I stretch myself out upon it. Yes, finally, I feel a type of peace and security until I no longer feel my sores and lesions.

Stretched upon the table, I engage in my gift for dreaming. It seems like my long wait for other living things and my yearning to see them has affected my dreams. I dream that I am staring distractedly at the ceiling, without any attention to its details, dreaming that I am some small green being, some vile, useless thing, some primitive, viscous, singled-celled creature. I feel two enormous gelatinous eyes with which I stare left and right without turning my head, blinking. What is that hole? It's on the ceiling, meaning my dream must have ended. I hope it does not pull me back into those strange and absurd feelings.

Has war passed through these parts? If so, and everyone was killed, how did I escape my death? And where are the corpses? If it was a long time ago, where are what remains of their bones? That cold shiver passes through me again and I won't hide from you a secret: when the heat intensifies to the point of rousing my anger, I muse over such questions which, naturally, bring about the cold shivers that reduce the heat significantly and make the weather more bearable. I would enjoy this and think myself quite smart on account of this single trick I have managed to perfect. But I'm afraid I may have ruined some brain cells by doing so, and the trick itself slipped its reins and I am no longer able to control it. It has begun to come when a feeling of estrangement took possession of me.

Once again I am by myself in the hall, on the table, in the town, I, alone, the one for whom death does not lust. Stretched upon the table into which I have begun to sink, to blend, its wooden slats having nearly become the marrow of my bones.

And so I arrive at the following: as long as I do not find anyone with whom to speak in this town, I will have to find a partner in another way. With that, I decide to divide myself into two imaginary beings, one, "I," and the other, "He." He resembled the image of me reflected in the bottles of finely aged wine. So, my dear handsome being, what shall I call you?

"I really have no idea about the names in vogue these days," I say, "but what do you think of me being 'I' and you being 'He'?"

I sense an expression of anger on the glasslike curves of his face.

"Why aren't I 'I' and you 'He'?" He asks.

"Because I'm the original, my dear."

"No, I'm the original and without me you wouldn't be able to live here."

"Fine. Don't be angry, my dear being. I have more experience and knowledge than you and I know the many meanings of sadness, fear, terror and estrangement. Such trifling matters do not matter to me. I'll concede. I'll be 'He' and you 'I.' Are you happy?"

"We still haven't settled things."

"What do you mean?"

"First of all, I want those bottles of wine."

"What?"

"Or else you'll never see me again and you'll suffer from loneliness."

"Is this blackmail or what? But fine, take them."

"And, my precious friend, find yourself a new place to sleep because I'll be sleeping on the table from now on. So get up!"

"Not that! You won't take it, not even in your dreams! I won't give up my table, I won't relinquish a part of me. Don't you understand?"

"But you relinquished it in effect when you brought me into being, so I don't think it will be hard to give up the table. And besides, you're giving it up to a part of yourself."

"No, you're not a part of me. The table is a part of me. My mother and father and my family and the others. The table is me. You're nothing but an illusion, a reflection in the glass."

He overwhelms me, truly, and so I throw him and all the wine bottles while screaming, "Get out, you strange gelatinous being, go to hell!" That being which resembled me disappears and I look to the table tenderly and rush to lie upon it.

"Don't be afraid, nothing will take me from you, not even death. You know well that death can't swallow me up nor digest me. Like me you're a stranger in this place, and I love you."

For the first time I sink into a deep sleep and dream that I am that boy in the myth who lies near the sea and contemplates his reflection in its surface. As for me, I am stretching out on the table, close to the sea, contemplating our reflection—the table and I—on its surface. The gods punished the boy by transforming him into a flower where he stood. And these same gods transform us into two beautiful flowers.

When I wake up, I pass some time gazing up at the ceiling in a good mood until, ever so gently, that mood evaporates because I am alone in the hall, on the table, in the town, alone, the only one after whom death does not lust. Stretched upon the table into which I have begun to sink, to blend, its wooden slats having nearly become the marrow of my bones.

I try to recover that pleasant mood which carried the scent of . . . I don't know! I try but it seems like I've lost it. Fine. I still have some of my dreams. No. I don't want to be that being. It seems that there is no other choice. Not so bad. I am now some small green being, some vile, useless thing, some primitive, viscous, singled-celled creature. I have two enormous gelatinous eyes with which I stare left and right without turning my head, blinking.

*Translated from the Arabic by Max Schmookler, with Najlaa Othman*