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Seven poems and an extract from his novel *Slipping* إنفلت الأصرابع

Words

No doubt
that all these words
which did not come to me
all last year
have somewhere gathered
into a whole book
I'll read some day by chance
and feel something like
two people who have met
in a past life.

 I'll whisper
something like, "this book
is writing me,"
then shake my head
as I take down another soul
off a shelf more distant still.

The law

For instance:
Your fingers are five,
but the gaps between them
only four,
and breaking the three days which we've just spent,
two nights.
Not strange, therefore,
a single sadness
claim us both
when we were never for one moment
one at all.

The dangers of what can happen at nursery

He wept
and the teacher held him
and consoled him.
But I could see
her grin behind his back
and by bad luck, just then,
my character was forming.

Disturb things so

I found you
in my bedroom
without warning
but it was a dream.
Then I opened the door for you
but that was a dream too.
I told you nothing, though,
I wanted the message
weightless as you that night
passing through.
So:
I'm still well.
I regularly expel
the pigeons from my balcony,
transfer the dust from room to room,
from time to time adjust the clocks,
surprise the chests and drawers,
disturb things so
the house not sleep.

Search

Even the letters
I sent to myself
haven't come,
and the little birds
that would come to me with whispers
are pecking now
at others' panes.
They must have changed my address
or it's that I'm
no longer here
so don't knock upon a door
that is not: go
so I can trail your shadow,
in your wake
a dead man walking
without church bells or wakes,
a shade in search
of postboxes.

Idle

Most of these poems
I embarked on
instead of life.
I'm grateful, then,
for idleness.
For most of what makes up my past,
let me speak honestly,
I owe a debt to hesitation,
though I'm too idle to embark
on a discussion.
Idleness and music,
loneliness of course,
a tested formulation
to fence one's minor trials
with dignity
and for the preparation
of poems one can't memorise.
And so I'll rise,
late as always,
will be the last to leave
without the least sense of anxiety,
for the future knows
how to look after itself,
will find its way to us,
fast or slow,
will reach the here and now
and sit short-breathed
from running the wrong way
and turn about
to make quite certain we're all gone,
then turn again,
alone,
to putting right these wrongs.

The gifts of loneliness

From your balcony
you pour the past
like washing water.
The memories
don't disappear;
water
is reclaimed by the sky
to pour over us again.
If memory won't make you cry
you'll be drenched by rain.

That one dumb time
we leant together

on the park fence:
the paint hadn't dried.
Recently, I passed the place again,
I looked and saw
the traces of our bodies on the steel
that shone that day.
Don't think the worst:
they've painted that fence over
several times since then,
it's just that I
can still make out our traces anyway.
On the kitchen shelves
you left me
all these jars
and glued above them
little labels, your round hand
giving the names of the spices
patiently and clear.
I knew
that all this care
would hurt me one day
but I still hope
that there's a future
that can make
these sorrows lighter,
that lets us choose
the feelings
that would suit us
off the shelf.
Not memory.
Not a jar in my kitchen
missing yet
a single pepper.
You forgot:
I always forget to use the spices.

We went together
where you belong
then I came back alone.
Without doubt, so much better
for me; this way
I was never caught in a goodbye
on home ground,
between four walls which watch me every day,
and so can stay
lying to the bed
and balcony and TV,
persuading them that you're not gone away
for good.

Your going means
that I no longer owe
a debt to all those accidents

that led me to you,
that I'm free of everything
except the only cage
from which I can't, try as I may
expel you.
I'll make do
with smoking memories
and colouring your features with the feelings
that usually don't come together
in the same place,
like surprise
and tears of hatred.
In my private dark
I sit at rest
but when I brush your warmth, I tremble.
Ghosts still frighten even when
they're of the ones we love.

Extract from *Slipping* (Two Lines, 2021)

1

His commands

From behind the glass the cold meat called to him; seemed to him at that moment—in the heat, midway through his fast—like nothing so much as a dollop of red chantilly cream, set to melt in the mouth as soon as it was laid there. He thought he might grill it in the narrow alley outside his building, then tried to remember where he'd put the grill stand, and couldn't. But on his return he received a surprise: his mother, bustling about the kitchen between cutting boards and cooking pots. The first time she had entered the kitchen since the death of his father.

She saw the bag of beef hanging from his hand. Put it in the fridge, she said wearily. Your father said to cook duck.

For one shaken instant he doubted his sanity. He came to me in a dream, she said simply. He was sitting in the big chair by the television, wearing his Eid robe, and he told me, Do us a couple of ducks, Sayyida. I said, Duck's too rich if you've been fasting. It'll give you indigestion, I said. But he insisted: I want a couple of ducks. They're in season.

So I said, Fine.

And his father had turned back to the television, while she had wept herself awake.

And then had got up, taken herself to the nearest town, collected the pension (her pension, and his) and, on her way back to the village, had stopped by the hatch of the government store to purchase a brace of duck and all the ingredients she needed to cook them. And when she got home, she had flipped the light switch in the kitchen, and had stood there, knees trembling, in the doorway.

Her whole life she'd spent here, and now it felt as though she was a stranger to it, or newly come.

But within minutes, that first illusion of unfamiliarity had melted away and ceded its place to sweet absorption and sweat in the cramped kitchen's heat.

They broke their fast wolfing part of the first duck, and left the rest in the fridge for later. The other she gave to a neighbour.

He told you to do that, too? he asked.

No, no, she said. Raqiya's been my rock. I promised myself she'd eat from the first meal I cooked.

He nodded and went to get some sleep before the night shift started.

Two days later he looked in on her, to ask if he could get her anything, and she said, What's that shirt, ya Ahmed? Wear the blue one.

She'd dreamt of him the night before. With his father. They'd both been laughing and the father had taken something from his pocket and handed it to his son. The son had peered at the thing and there had been a look of delight on his face. He had been wearing the blue shirt.

Wear the blue, my boy, she repeated. God will bless your day.

And so it was, starting on the day of the ducks, some four months since his passing, that the father reestablished himself in the house, dictating what they ate, prodding them to

visit this relative or that, disclosing the location of documents that lay hidden amid drifts of paper and junk. And as time went on, these edicts started to touch on more serious matters: like his demand, couched in the same coded language of dreams, that his son give up his night job. And the son grew first agitated, then peevish, and the stomach complaint that had been a constant companion while his father had lived, returned. He kept expecting to see him sitting in the living room, to run into him on the way to the bathroom, and whenever he hung back from fulfilling these dream-conveyed commands, his mother would wail, God protect you, my boy, in tones of genuine apprehension. And in her words a further implication: that such divine protection was wholly dependent on the father not being provoked, even in death.

The suspicion that she might have begun to fabricate these dreams first crept into his thoughts, then crystallised. That was the time she interpreted a dream to mean he should stay away from a girl he was thinking of marrying, and then a second girl, soon afterwards. Father never had an issue with me marrying, he would tell himself, and his doubts grew. And though he lacked the courage to tell her straight out, he started to think of her revelations as lies. At times these waves of suspicion would swell and rise and he would feel angry at her; or they'd settle, and the anger would turn on his father, lording it over their household from the grave.

Just when he was considering leaving home altogether, his father came to him in a dream. The first time he'd come: standing mournfully at his son's bedroom door and nodding towards the room where he'd himself once slept.

Get up, he said. Wake your mother.

2

The passers-by don't care what we do

Clouds inching across the sky as though afraid they'd spill, while down below I strained to keep up with Bahr's short-legged but rapid clip.

In Muharram Bey he led me down a narrow street with wide balconies beneath its windows and came to a halt outside a huge, silent building which ran from corner to corner of a single block, and there we lingered. Bahr appeared to be thinking. Then he set off again, tripping along until we came to a broad avenue aglow in the pale sunlight of early winter in Alexandria.

The old buildings sagged against one another, yellowed and peeling. They were set back from the road on either side, and between them lay a great network of tramlines, crossing and recrossing like a tracery of veins. Bahr picked a path between the tracks, and cautiously I followed after. Followed across rail after rail, while up ahead Bahr kept his gaze fixed on the ground as though trying marry a memory to the sight before his eyes.

And then he stopped. Here, he whispered, and tugged at me until I was stood bolt upright, directly behind him. And at that very instant, there came from somewhere far away the distinctive metallic tick of tram wheels, and as it grew louder there, an identical ticking, an echo of the first, started up somewhere behind us.

From where I stood, looking out over the top of Bahr's head, I could see a tram approaching from our right, and another, its twin, running in from the left. Both were making straight for us, and my knees began to tremble involuntarily.

Bahr?

For a few seconds he said nothing, then:

Shut your eyes if you want.

But I couldn't bring myself to shut my eyes, and once again steeled myself to face the gathering madness of the mission ahead. The ticking grew louder and the ground shook, little pieces of gravel hopped and flew, and from either side the approaching trams began to pick up speed. I wanted to run, but it was too late for that. I could lose my way amid the forest of tram tracks, might land on the wrong line. I stayed put.

First to reach us was the right-hand tram. Its ancient, dilapidated snout kinked our way ever so slightly, almost close enough to brush us as it passed, and I saw—or thought I saw—the driver on his raised stool, gazing down at us with absolute impassivity. And then the left-hand tram arrived, rolling down rails that seemed only slightly offset from the tracks the other had taken, and it kinked too, a few millimetres away this time, to the other side, and went on by, car after car looming over us, yellow as the shadows of the buildings on either side of the road. If we'd shifted even a centimetre we would have been run down.

We stood, then, in a roughly circular and impossibly tiny clearing created by bracketing trams. The racket from the wheels was tremendous and Death was breathing very close and the daylight was vanishing behind the roof of each passing carriage then reappearing, and then, amid the flickering light, I saw her: sat at her sewing machine in a nightgown, peering at me.

She said, You've grown, Seif. She sounded surprised.

Then she disappeared, a star winking out, and it felt to me as though the passing trams would never come to an end. What if Bahr had miscalculated? What if the rails with their central jutting tooth were to shift, just fractionally? What if one—too old, perhaps, or poorly maintained—were to buckle or bend? Was this what suicides felt in

the last seconds before impact? Did they see what I saw, or did nervous shock claim them before the shock of steel?

And then, at last, the trams were gone. An At Last that accounted for no more than a few seconds, but even so I patted at my hair, perhaps to feel whether that patch of rougher grey had spread. But Bahr seemed invigorated. The Safe Point—as he called it, referring to a page in the notebook—still existed. Was it a product of pure chance, or had some engineer placed it there on purpose, as a kind of secret game? And who had first discovered it?

Before I could ask, Bahr laid his hand on my shoulder and nodded to the place we'd been standing, where the two lines parted and rejoined, and he gave me a wink and asked, Did you see anything? I paled and stayed silent, so he repeated his question, smile widening.

Who was it?

My voice was a whisper: My mother.

He stared at me blankly for a second, then nodded slowly. His expression seemed to reflect a trace of disappointment and he opened his mouth as though to speak then seemed to reconsider. At last, lips thinned, he muttered, Typical!

Still stunned, I made no reply. Instead, I looked at him: the neat, greyed hair, the peculiar red glasses, the vigour I attributed to a life spent out of doors. Nothing at all like a man who would be dead within a month. Not that I knew that then, though I can't now summon the memory without the fact of his death surfacing through it.

Between dream and waking is when I see us, always standing beneath that soft sunlight in Muharram Bey, my tongue too heavy to warn him.

3

Where were you, ya Ali?

The first thing he knew was that a great black stone was resting its full weight on his chest and head, and for a moment he thought—as was usually the case in his nightmares—that he had died. For the briefest fraction of a second he thought it must be his sleep paralysis, the immobility which gripped his body if he went to bed overtired, but when he tried to wiggle his finger the fingertip responded, and so with his elbow, then his arm, and then he summoned his courage and cracked a lid open. A dazzle of sunlight. A scatter of flies floating before his eyes. Turning his head, he saw that he was lying in the dust surrounded by garbage. Was it a dump? What's more, he appeared to be lying in a shallow trench, scraped a few centimetres deep into the packed earth. A pain at the back of his head and in his joints. His chest was tight.

The ground beneath him started shaking and then it was as though church bells were clanging furiously, a sound which suddenly resolved itself into that of a train's warning bell, which was the next instant supplanted by the din of a horn, blaring at a tremendous pitch and getting closer and more powerful with every second. Seized with terror, he shut his eyes and the next instant opened them again to see the hulking mass of a train rushing by very close on his right hand side, its horn battering his ears, and then, before his heartbeat could return to normal, the train was off into the distance, disappeared, and now at last he pushed himself up from the ground, and stood.

He looked about him, and saw no one. In the distance, the indistinct form of a bird dipped low to the ground then rose up and flapped away.

Where am I, and what now?

With a little effort he managed to remember his name, and feeling himself all over found no wounds, despite the pain. Another look around. For as far as he could see nothing but distant rooftops and the snaking tracks. Then, blossoming inside of him without warning, a thought: Noha! What had happened to her?

And then he remembered. Everything but the thing he needed to remember.

He had just finished trimming his hair and shaving over at his friend's apartment. His family were at home, waiting for him, and her family were at her place, also waiting for him, and he was to go to her place with his family, was to take her from the hair salon downstairs and set out for the wedding venue, thus bringing to an end the journey of patience and longing and exhaustion and, with it, her own mortal terror. He won't leave me... will he?, a line she uttered every day, tirelessly, and which he would laugh to hear spoken because his heart had been locked away behind her ribs from the outset.

He'd left his friend and taken a shortcut home, where he had to put on the wedding suit sold to him, at a discount, by another friend. Joy was nearly in his grasp; joy, or an end at least to the yearning and the exhaustion.

Among the last things he remembered seeing: children running metal hoops; a pick-up being loaded from a small bar; a pair of young women walking together; a woman doing the watering on a balcony overhead and the water dripping to the ground.

He had gone round the back of the grey building on the corner of Awqaf Street, down a narrow lane without doors or windows, and emerging on the other side had turned to his right, lengthening his stride. He had thought that he'd heard a woman's voice calling out, but turning to look had seen... Only darkness.

Where are you, ya Ali? What time is it? There was his watch on his right wrist, unstolen. He was astonished. And when he looked at it, the terror found him. Twelve-thirty, and the hot sun overhead told him that it was half-past noon, not midnight.

You left your friend's apartment at five in the evening. A night's gone by, ya Ali. A whole night's passed and left you here, in day. The time seems right: take the sun, take the fact you've started to feel famished. A whole night. Noha waiting for you surrounded by family. All night long and you didn't come.

God!

He could feel his mobile in his pocket and he took it out. It was off. When he tried switching it on, nothing happened—as thoroughly dead as though it had never been charged at all—and inside him a new fear rose up and was quickly suppressed. He continued to search his pockets. Here was his wallet, here his identity card, everything where it should be, and so what had happened? What am I doing here? He looked around. Where is Here anyway? And where is everybody?

The question suggested itself because the buildings, which he had now reached, appeared to be completely empty, empty even of ghosts. Walking slowly along he saw not a single human being, man or sheikh or child, and as he made his way between the buildings he would start at the sound of doors clapping in the breeze. Building after building and nothing heard, nothing seen.

Had the world come to an end?

But he remembered the train.

Out onto something resembling a highway, he spotted a road sign caked in dirt, and wiping the dust from the letters with his shoe read the name of a place he had never heard of, and walked on down the road. He sighed with relief when the first truck went by. But no one stopped for him and he on he went until, up ahead, he saw the outskirts of another town.

When he saw a child playing on the doorstep of a house his alarm subsided, and then people began to appear, singly and in knots, on foot and in vehicles. He still had no idea where he was. He became aware that his clothes and face were covered with dirt and he paused to brush it off.

There was a woman selling vegetables from a stall. He walked up to her, right up to the face behind its niqab, and then walked on by. He was afraid to tell anyone he was lost; they might take advantage of him, might be suspicious.

Then he found a little coffee shop with a cart set up outside it selling chopped liver, so he bought a couple of sandwiches and sat down, and the man from the coffee shop brought him a glass of water, then a glass of tea, and the tiny television set being on he moved closer to see what he could see, to understand anything at all, and the news reports meant nothing to him, but then he saw a calendar on the wall, and saw that it was Sunday, and the legs that had carried him from his friend's place on Thursday evening began to shake.

Three lost days, not one. What was happening? What had happened to him? To the world? Noha?

Later, he would learn everything. Would learn of the faintings and the nervous breakdowns, of the fury which raged through her household, of the humiliations and insults directed at his, of the hours spent waiting in apartments and at the venue, of the departure first of the maazoun, then of the guests. Of the shock of friends and the fretting of relatives. Later, he would learn of their disappearance, Noha and her family, of their family home shut up and abandoned. He would know his mother's tears, his father's silence, the deluge of his siblings' questions and their demands for answers, for an explanation of his absence for those three days. And it would seem to him then that the whole world was just these five words: Where were you, ya Ali?

Not a cut or a bruise anywhere on his body. Nothing stolen. All the time he'd been gone, no stranger had appeared demanding a ransom and there'd been no sinister calls. Something had happened to him. Had it killed him, it would at least have kept his dignity

intact. But nothing had happened. He had emerged from an alley, heard a woman's voice, and come to on a patch of packed earth halfway between Cairo and Alexandria — slightly closer to Alexandria, perhaps. Then he had gone home: materialising at the entrance to his street like a djinn, like a premonition of disaster.

And they had returned, dizzy from their rounds through the hospitals and clinics and police stations and homes of friends and acquaintances, to find the missing man in perfect health, not a scratch on him, and nothing to sooth their anger.

4

We walked on water and we met a stranger

Where the corniche wall ran out a great tree hooped over to drink from the river, and beyond the tree there was nothing: nothing between us and the water.

We walked by the light of the stars, to our left a scattering of buildings, silent as though abandoned, none more than two storeys high. There was the distant, soft howling of dogs, and the rustle of small things, some living, from the ground. All of a sudden Bahr halted, and pulled me to one side, right to the lip of the riverbank, and for a moment it was as though he wanted me to leap into the Nile, but then I saw by the starlight a flight of stone steps, appeared as if from nowhere: a narrow flight, running from the high ground where we stood down to the water's surface, to where there was no jetty, no boat, no hut, no nothing. As though inviting us under.

Without saying a word, Bahr cautiously began his descent and I went down behind him, and when he came to the second to last step, just before he reached the water, Bahr sat down and I took the step above him. We leant back against the wall, and Bahr spoke.

He said: It was against a wall like this, on steps like these, that I kissed a girl for the first time.

I listened, waiting for him to go on, but he was done. In that silence, it felt as though the stars were humming for us, lullabying, soothing us to sleep.

Out in the heart of the river's darkness there was a movement, and we sat up, suddenly alert. Then, astonished — at least, I was astonished — we saw: a man, coming over the river, walking on water. Bahr got to his feet. Now, he said, and placed his feet on the final step so that the water lapped at his soles, then he stooped down and took them off and without turning round, told me, Take off your shoes.

My quaking heart.

The man drew closer. He was wearing a robe with the hem held up off his knees and, like Bahr, seemed to be holding shoes or slippers in one hand. He trod carefully, and I could see that with each step the water just covered the round of his heel.

When the man reached us he stopped and said, Assalamu aleikom — which greeting we returned — and then, Bahr shrinking back to make space, he stepped carefully up onto the bottom step. He examined us for a moment, and it seemed as though he was on the verge of asking us something, but he seemed to reconsider and climbed past us to the top of the riverbank — the height of a roof above us — and wandered away.

Now Bahr extended a foot and placed it on the face of the river, and it sunk in until the water lipped the heel, just as with the feet of the man in the robe. He placed the second foot beside the first, took a step, and nodded. Smiled.

Let's go.

My bare sole descended a few centimetres through river water and came to rest on a slippery surface. Later, I would learn that for a period just before dawn the dam's floodgates were closed and the river would thin and clear as the water-level dropped; that at some point the people hereabouts had worked out that for these few minutes a raised stretch of riverbed was brought right to the surface and, in the brief interval before the floodgates reopened and the raised bed sank back beneath the deepening water, would use it as a shortcut. Would walk from dry land to dry land seeming, to those not from here, for all the world like prophets or saints: striding splendidly yet humbly over the waves.

As I dipped my foot to follow Bahr I knew none of this.

I trod carefully, watching the Nile's gentle waves by the moon's light and trying to make out the sound they made, trying to remember the particular word for that sound. Was it Zajeej, perhaps? Haad? What had Alya called it? I tried to picture her saying the word and imitating the sound. Singing it.

This was before Bahr. It all began the day I'd woken, having spent the night in a friend's apartment, to find no friend there. Not to say I felt any of the fleeting trauma of opening your eyes somewhere unfamiliar, no: it was with a sense of belonging that I got up and moved through the apartment in search of the bathroom. Which was when it reached me, the sweet strong sound of song from somewhere to the left of the living room.

A woman's song, soft but with breadth, like those old-time dive-bar divas. And for all that it was faint, more like a murmur or a shifting of wings. Half awake and half bewitched I trailed the song line, and when I came to the kitchen door I stopped and stood and watched her.

Standing there, illuminated by the light from the window: of medium height, broad, wide-eyed, red hair. She was wearing a white robe, a man's robe which looked too big for her, hem held in one hand and the other gently swirling a kanaka over a low flame. She smiled, as though expecting me.

I'm Alya. Coffee?

One slow nod and I had forgotten the world outside.

When later I was trying to remember which song Alya had sung in the kitchen that morning (that morning: in the kitchen), I would fail; would fail to remember, and neither would she remember, at which I would tell myself she wasn't trying. But I always recall that first strange murmur, when she was humming or breathing the tune in a voice familiar as the river's faint ripples which now trembled beneath our feet. Or was it something else?

It's haad, she told me.

Haad?

The sound of the sea.

Her mouth to my ear: Close your eyes.

Her lips brushed my lobe and she hummed, and then there was the sound of waves surging, till I could smell the sharp tang of adolescence in Bahri. The days we used to take off up to Alexandria on the six a.m. train, trying to chat up pink peasant schoolgirls en route between their Delta towns, the girls crammed and jostling along the packed wooden benches and wedged up against the broken windows, and with the last of them gone, getting down at Sidi Gaber and riding the tram to Al Ramal.

But it's not the same as lajab, she said.

What's that again?

The sound of waves clashing.

And then, to my astonishment, I heard the sound of those high crashing waves in whose clothes-soaking spray we used to delight. And I lifted my head and opened my eyes and looked at her.

And what else?

Everything. She smiled. All the sounds.

Himar, the sound of falling rain. Ajij, the sound of flame. Flutterings, tricklings, grazings, trillings. Sounds I didn't know had names, names I didn't know had sounds, and Alya knew every one, performed them all. In the morning humming, singing in the evening, and at midday taking me on a journey through every wave there was.

But the word for the sound of the river over which we were walking: that, I could not remember. And I saw Bahr climbing a flight of steps on the other bank, and he turned to me and asked was I ready to see more?

5 His doctor

The first thing Ashraf noted was the absence of mirrors. There were broad windows, smoked glass blotting up the pale light, but no mirrors. Not a single, familiar face in this strange place, and he couldn't even see his own.

Ashraf had a young man's face despite the unmistakable grey of his hair. Like his fellow students he had been in his mid-twenties when he'd finally graduated from medical school, and had then entered three years of national service to emerge within touching distance of thirty. Leaving camp on the last day of service, the desert highway outside had seemed to stand for the long bleak road that had been his life, then longer still, the road ahead through employment, studying for the MA and the PhD, and everything that sent a spasm through his colon when he thought of it.

Just to put food in his mouth he joined the practice of a doctor who was an acquaintance of a former classmate: a clinic in a working class neighbourhood which put a few pennies his way each month. It wasn't that his future looked black; rather, that it had vanished into the distance some considerable time ago and there was no hope now of catching it up.

When the offer came he hardly had to think about it all.

At first they told him it was a private clinic. Situated in a quiet neighbourhood, serving the only the best people. His response was a wary eagerness; he couldn't understand why they would select someone like him for such an evidently lucrative position. The first surprise was that the clinic they spoke of was not located on any street or square, but inside the walls of a villa, a palace: through the gates and down a long and verdantly fringed drive. The second was that this hospital had no name. The only signs inside were those of the different departments. The third? That though it was full of people shuffling about in medical white, Ashraf didn't see a single patient; never saw anyone whose appearance bespoke illness. Nor was there a cafeteria for visitors, or a Reception: it was as though you skipped all the preliminaries and stepped directly into the heart of the hospital, where the beds that filled its rooms were few, and empty.

Looking around, Ashraf told himself that perhaps the clinic hadn't been opened to the public yet. Then he realised that there'd been no opening and never would be. No opening, no invitations, no visitors, no patients. The entire place was run for the sake of just one man, and he wasn't even ill. The X-rays and diagnostic images hanging on the walls of the various departments all came from the same source: those radiographed teeth sat in his jaw, the kidney on the right of that digestive tract belonged to him, and the modest little medical institute annexed to the hospital, the lectures delivered there and the doctors who graduated from its courses, all revolved around the workings and wellness of a single body.

There was nothing public about the place; no theoretical or statistical findings that might be applied or compared to others. This was not a place of treatment; it was a place for the treatment of Ibrahim Alalayli. Remove that name from the equation and you had nothing.

Ashraf encountered junior doctors who had never in their lives studied or treated anything other than the health and habits of Alalayli: orthopaedists who straightened only Alalayli's bones, heart specialists who specialised in Alalayli's heart. Generalists, surgeons, haematologists, vascular experts: a small minority, very rarely, were compelled to make some intervention; the majority would study and analyse and run routine tests for years on end and never once get to put their knowledge to work. The lack of experience was

not absolute. Some, like Ashraf, had come there after a short stint in the field, others had never extended themselves beyond theory, yet others were skilled and respected practitioners who had made public declarations of retirement, even as they accepted Alalayli's proposal that they drop everything to care for him should the call come through. Most worked in the building, a few lived there, and a very few actually travelled with him, accompanying Alalayli wherever he went. There was the car which carried the personal bodyguards and then, never more than a few yards away, another vehicle, from the outside unremarkable, but kitted out with equipment and carrying a team of highly skilled doctors and paramedics. Just a few yards away from their sole client, the man who wouldn't move an inch without them, sat the emergency room elite and at their head the specialists — heart and veins and brains.

Alalayli had resolved not to die.

With time, the employees of Alalayli's hospital came to believe themselves incapable of dealing with any body other than their client's. It was a simple enough matter to spread rumours of retirement or of new jobs in distant provincial hospitals; the problem came with friends and relatives, their casual requests for advice, medical emergencies. The real problem wasn't Alalayli's unbreakable rule, which is to say, that any doctor caught treating anybody other than him would be dismissed with maximal prejudice (the word Prejudice being in no way metaphorical, for Alalayli had the means to exact revenge, to do damage, to imprison if he chose). No, the problem was that all the staff here, Ashraf among them, gradually came to feel the same thing: that they were the property of Alalayli's hospital; or that, to speak more exactly, they realised that the one thing which rendered the idea of intruding their diagnoses and scalpels into the lives of ordinary people bearable, was the multiplicity of these people, their diversity and their profusion. That it was this profusion which allowed a doctor to feel that an error here might be put right there; lent them the scrupulous equivocation of a soldier in an execution squad, who cannot know whether the fatal bullet is chambered in his gun or that of the man next to him. So with your average doctor: did he kill the patient or was it someone — something — else? But here, where there was only one patient, one life at stake, there was no washing hands, no escaping the knowledge that you'd killed.

Which thoughts would fill his head as he made his way to and from the hospital, endlessly turning them over as he sat at his desk, studying a patient he might never see. So he came to believe that these thoughts were his secret. Trapped behind the walls of this silent, green corridorred palace, he felt himself a stranger in the company of others.

But all that changed the day he heard a whisper about a strange visitor, a young woman who both belonged and didn't belong. Alalayli's daughter, went the rumour. She flitted past him, a bird barely touching to earth, and was soon gone: back down the corridor that had brought her to him and away. To Ashraf, it seemed as though some ghostly breeze stirred her hair and blew it out behind her. And as she approached the exit a thin young man stood up. He didn't seem to belong to her world at all, yet he followed her out and they left together.

The whisper had brought him the young man's name — Salaam — and with it his story, which had made it clear to Ashraf the dangers that genes carried with them.

6

A white cow the size of a hand

Doctors who were Believers astonished Bahr. Didn't they see the elephant in the room? Medicine is an Atheist, he would say. By its very nature! If not, then how to explain all the errors in creation? The mistakes that stemmed from the source, that came bred in the bone, and the faults in construction that prevented these bodies of ours from carrying their miserable tenants through the handful of decades which was their lot on this earth?

If a doctor must believe, Bahr would say, rolling a cigarette, then it should be in his own divinity, in himself: he who spent a lifetime fixing such shoddy design, giving these creatures another, better chance at existence. Doctor's practices were licensed dealers, repair shops that warranted the products of the Lord in Whom they believed.

If medicine wasn't an atheist then there'd be no call to fight so hard against microbes and viruses, all those cells that suddenly turn on themselves. You could fight half, a quarter, as hard and leave the rest to God.

But talk was cheap.

That said, Bahr went on, *I have seen a god. I have seen many gods walking about in this world.* The first was a young doctor, a woman I met not more than a month after arriving in cold country. I was hungry, without shelter. Ya Seif, I would pick through garbage till I found something unspoiled to eat. And Seif... their garbage, Seif! Finer than the food in half the restaurants here. Only, that day I'd been unlucky, or maybe the fault lay in this faulty body of mine. I had eaten a doughnut which I'd found still cased in its white paper wrapping, just two bites taken from its leading edge; two little snips from — so I imagined — the pretty teeth of one of those angels who would pass me by in the street. So I ate, and my belly briefly quietened, and then this tremendous pain ignited inside me, like a dog was worrying at my guts. The sweat dripped off me, turning instantly icy in the cold outside, the world spun, and I woke to the face of a goddess.

She was leaning over me like the sky, and she was smiling. She was talking to me in the language of that country, and I could hear only heavenly sounds. She laid her milk-white fingers on my shoulder and she talked in other tongues, now in English and now in French, and I looked and saw that I was dressed in white, in a hospital robe, and all the while this young doctor — she was in her mid-twenties, no more — carried on talking to me and smiling.

It took some effort, but I managed to understand that I had been poisoned. Not by the lovely binned doughnut; it was alcohol poisoning, from the bottle I'd had off the semi-comatose homeless man down by the river. It would have killed me had the ambulance not arrived and carried me off to the young doctor who pumped my stomach, settled me down, and smiled at me. And insisted I stay put till morning.

In the morning my clothes came, and I saw that they had been washed and folded, and when at last I left, the doctor was standing by the door of one of the rooms, pale from her sleepless night. She gave me a tired smile. Goodbye, Mr. Buhar, she said. I was feeling myself again, feeling full, like I'd live for a thousand years, but this little goddess was content with a nod. She wanted no thanks. She had cured me as I was dying, had fed me when I was hungry, had clothed me against fear, and wanted not a word of thanks in return. If she'd asked me to worship her I would have dropped to my knees. And nor was she the only one I saw over there.

There was the old god and his wife who invited me for tea in their house More of a shack, really. On the edge of a forest. Maybe it was a holiday home, I don't know. Does God go on holiday? Does He work?

I was freezing. They gave me a cup of tea and offered me the use of a mattress on the floor of a small, warm room. They were not afraid of me, and I did not thank them, and when I went to sleep I dreamed that they were leaning over me. Or were they actually?

Next morning they laid out a breakfast, which I ate, and the old god told me that he believed in one religion and one devotion: that every day you help another human being. And he invited me to join him in his faith, but in those days I was a sinner, and irredeemable, so I finished my breakfast and went on running.

Years had passed since my encounter with the goddess at the hospital. I had entered their paradise, had committed my crime, and now I was on the run. But the gods there were everywhere.

And just as Bahr paused to draw breath we found ourselves approaching the wall that was our destination. An old temple wall, its reliefs worn smooth but still, in their ghostly traces, speaking of the site's original purpose.

Dawn was breaking as we climbed a rough track through wracks of scrub. We rose with the hillside, the Nile we had crossed like saints falling away behind us, broad and still and unobtrusive, its either bank lined with a thin strip of high palms and indeterminate herbage. And just as we were beginning to pant, there, suddenly, was an opening in the slope's rocky folds, scarcely large enough to admit a grown man, and in this opening, from within, fingers were beckoning to us. So we bent and entered.

I had been expecting quiet, so the voices and blur of movement took me by surprise. When my eyes had adjusted to the light I saw a large gathering seated on the ground, most of them women and children, and caught the scent of incense in the air. Overhead the sun was rising shyly, preceded by its rays which, an expertly placed spotlight, fell against a bright and almost blank white wall facing us.

Then the singing began.

Praise songs for the prophet, prayers, God's names, all sounded echoless and somehow out of keeping in this ancient space, and then the women and children stopped singing, though their chants and charms continued to tremble in the air. Everyone was staring at the wall, as though they were at the cinema, and I stared with them.

Here was the cure for those denied visions, for those whose supplications fell flat: the hidden wall was the secret these clustered hamlets never divulged. To strangers, nothing but a scored and pillaged ruin, but for these people, in these minutes between dawn and sunup, on those blessed mornings heralded by the full moon nights, you could, if you were a believer, and true, and full of love, see the one you sought.

Look well and pray to the prophets and when your faith is brimming over then you will see them: the beloved. Clear as day or through a veil. Held by your eye, or embodied in your mind. They will greet you or guide you or reassure. Look first at the wall until your eyes go white with it, till they blink and tear.

And then we began to hear muffled weeping around us, and the sound of women murmuring names, and as I sat there, cross-legged, a little boy crawled past my foot and I leant forward, and brushed his hair with my hand, and its coarseness astonished me. And I leant back against the wall. I told myself that if these people were able to see their departed here in this place, then how much sooner and clearer should be my visions of the dead? So I stared until my eyes burned, and I saw.

I saw night and then, in that night, the form of a black dog moving through the darkness. It was followed by a second dog, then a third, and so on until there were five. Five dogs, now standing on a street corner I thought I recognised, and now on the move, a quick trot in formation like a military patrol towards the entrance to a building. An entrance which made me straighten where I sat.

It was my old home, my place of play and sanctuary. I saw the five dogs pad up the stairs to the fifth floor where we'd lived, pause for a moment outside our apartment, and then I heard the first dog give a peculiar howl, in which he was quickly joined by the others. Then I remembered. I saw, and I remembered.

I had been asleep in the living room, when I was woken by the sound of someone calling my name, and had seen my father's big dark body in its white vest emerge from his bedroom and walk over to the front door. He had peered through the spyhole and recoiled, muttering in shock and surprise. Then, taking a deep breath, had thrown the door open.

My father had thrown it open and stood in the doorway of our apartment, and facing him had stood the five dogs, now silent. The leader had yawned, a final, unvoiced howl, as though delivering a message, then turning, had padded down the stairs with the others following noiselessly after.

We had only understood the message a week later, when my mother died.

I became aware that my shoulder was shaking gently and I looked up to see Bahr, a pitying smile on his lips: You slept? This time, I didn't tell him what I had seen and he didn't ask, and looking about I saw there were no women there, no children, no one. The deserted space was filled with sun now, and by its bright light the temple seemed like a normal tomb, and the carvings I'd thought were pharaonic just the scratchings of idle visitors.

As we came to leave Bahr held a whispered conversation with the man who had beckoned us in and seemed to give him something—or did he take?—and then we went back down the path we'd climbed, the heat of the day penetrating our clothes and pricking them with sweat. And as the ground levelled off, Bahr turned and began to stride off a different way to that we'd come, following the tentative scheme whose true madness was becoming clearer to me with every passing day. From time to time I would regard him from the corner of my eye, and would be invaded by sudden terror at the reality of my situation: that I was in the company of a total stranger, in places that were mostly isolated and no less strange.

Then I would tell myself that I was no less a stranger to the person I had been just days before, when, one hot afternoon, on one of her rare visits to the magazine, Leila had approached me and, with a newfound air of purpose, had first forbidden me from opening my mouth, and then produced from the magic box of her handbag the most unexpected object: a white ceramic cow the size of my palm. Had handed it to me and said, You've no excuse now, and gazed into my eyes with a strength that shook my heart and a smile I tried not to see. She had delivered her double-bladed command:

Seif, wake up!

Her statement—her order, rather—was literally meant. I'd assumed the thing would function like a regular alarm clock, for all it was done up to look like a grinning ruminant, but at the time appointed it lowed. A deafening low which snatched me quaking from sleep in order to silence the noise. I thought it might break the windows. That such a small body could produce this terrific din astonished me, and I was reminded of the surprise I'd received a few days before. The name Bahr Kamel—Ocean Entire!—had suggested to me a bearlike figure, or at least one very tall, only to find him much closer to short and thin. Short and thin and grey-haired, wearing the jeans and blue T-shirt of a younger man.

Leila told me he was waiting for me by reception. As soon as he saw me he slid elegantly to his feet, there was a brief introduction, then he gently guided me by the arm and led me to the exit so that we might continue our conversation outside. I was no stranger to monomaniacs barging into the office with bombshells which only ever went off in their own minds, but this man had none of that unbalanced energy and I went with him. Downstairs, out on the street, he glanced around, pulled a small notebook from his pocket and, after a brief consultation, announced that the alley was nearby.

We crossed July 26 Street, then Tawfiqiya, and as we came into Ramses Street it seemed for a moment that we must be making for the train station, but he walked instead towards Galaa, through the green-painted railings and past a coffee shop famous for the poor service it gave to passing trade. Now I was sure we must be headed for a grand old historic building which lay just up ahead, but before we reached it, Bahr stopped and smiled.

Get ready.

He replaced the notebook in his pocket, pulled his upturned collar tight about his neck and strode quickly past the entrance to the old building. The building turned out to have a twin further along the street, and between the two was a long alleyway at whose far end could be glimpsed the yellow roofing of the station. What surprised me, though, was the powerful ice-cold breeze which issued out of it. Our clothes began to flap and beat and I peered to see where this wind might be coming from, but there was nothing to see except the silent, marmoreal walls, featureless but for little openings set high up in the surface like the loopholes in the ramparts of a Mamluk fortress. Bahr produced a small camera and took a few shots, and then he pulled out a second device, pressing down on one side of it and waiting for a few moments, before returning it to his bag. He jotted a few words in his notebook and gripped his flapping shirt. Let's go, he said.

We retreated back to the street, me trailing him in silent bewilderment, and as soon as we emerged from between the twin buildings we were once more pressed flat by the furnace heat of mid-July.

But after that first trip to the alley, Bahr had vanished and, lost to the ghosts who were crowding ever thicker about me, I almost forgot him altogether. In fact, the thing I remember most clearly from that period was finding out that Leila had taken a team from the magazine to visit the scene of the Elevator Children, a case whose surreal and bloody details had been received with universal horror.

Leila had reappeared a few days later. She was in the editor's office, leaning against the wall beside the low window, but rather than looking out at the street or up at the sky she was looking straight down, as though examining her shoes. I was able to watch her for a moment before she noticed me, at which she said, without preamble, They made us walk over corpses. I thought how much she'd changed, then caught myself staring at her legs rising up into her skirt, and I imagined them—those legs—walking over me, and when I realised that this made me a corpse I realised, too, that I wouldn't much mind.

At which point I remembered that I had dreamed of her the night before. A few nights before, maybe. We were in sitting together, at home, and eating macaroni that Leila had cooked; the same macaroni we used to buy from a small restaurant in Bab Al Louq back when we first met. The food smelled and tasted delicious, and I knew that in a short while we'd be headed for the bedroom, and there was this sudden access of joy. And then, as Leila turned away from me and got up to fetch a glass of water, I felt a hair between the pieces of food in my mouth. Quickly, before she came back and caught me, I pulled at the hair. It was long and red, from a woman's head, and it kept on coming, longer and longer, endlessly long, and then I began to choke. I remember choking and

pulling and glancing up wretchedly in anticipation of Leila's return. Which is how the dream ended.

But now Leila brought me back to reality.

You're going to accompany him on an expedition. The magazine's sending you. I stared at her uncomprehendingly, and she smiled in disbelief.

Bahr! Don't you remember him?

I watched as she slipped back behind her desk and sat down. So confident, as though she'd been here forever. There was something astonishing about the way she'd managed to make herself at home. But this train of thought I knew brought pain and I shut it down. And I thought to myself how difficult it was to guess Bahr's age. I said, An expedition? Where?

Here, she said, pointing to the floor. This country, I mean.

I had no choice. I couldn't refuse. It had been a while since I'd submitted a serious piece and had it not been for Leila taking pity on me and exerting herself on my behalf I would have been fired long ago. I had stopped being surprised at Leila's capacity for sudden interventions, her ability to save me, despite the fact that it was me who had introduced to her to the magazine. To journalism, in fact. And once again, I shut the thought down.

I knew that Bahr was an Egyptian who had returned home after several years living abroad, and that he—or so he claimed—was in the process of researching a long, serialised piece (was it with a book in mind, maybe?) on certain places in Egypt. The magazine wanted me to accompany him, and this was the plan:

Bahr would write up detailed bulletins from his expeditions to be published in the country of his former exile, and I would write for our magazine: reports on Bahr and his project. A considerable amount of activity for someone like me, who didn't get around much and hadn't cared about anything for years.

Isn't there anyone else? Someone who'd actually like this kind of thing?

Lots of people, she snapped. Then, after a pause: It was Bahr who chose you, not the magazine.

An astonished silence.

Don't ask me why. Maybe you could ask him yourself.

I stared at her, the colour drained from my face. I'd never met the man until recently and my name wasn't well known enough to have reached the ears of an Egyptian living overseas. The only way it would have got there would be if I'd sailed ahead of it. And then, perhaps because the man did seem to know me and had requested me by name, a faint enthusiasm began to glow and catch inside me, and fearing a response that might douse this thin flame and thereby prompt me to let down both Leila and myself, I shrank from the thought of seeking an explanation.

A job that might get me out of my rut, I told myself, and then, however many days or weeks later, I could return to my bed and Bahr could go back into exile and, who knows, maybe it would make it possible for me to go overseas (behind the bahr!) or clear a path that would lead me back to Leila. Or her to me.

And even before I knew what was involved, I had started to picture the coverage, or rather the series of investigations which have brought me here, to where I am now. All of which, like everything else in life, turned out to be pure fantasy.

Slowly but surely I would come to understand that the writing and the reports were cover for something else entirely, something considerably crazier—if we might be allowed to divide the world along those lines: the crazy and the not—but back then I did not know this, and nor did I know (and nor, somehow, did Bahr) that we would not be coming back. Just as had happened to Alya, before us.

Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger