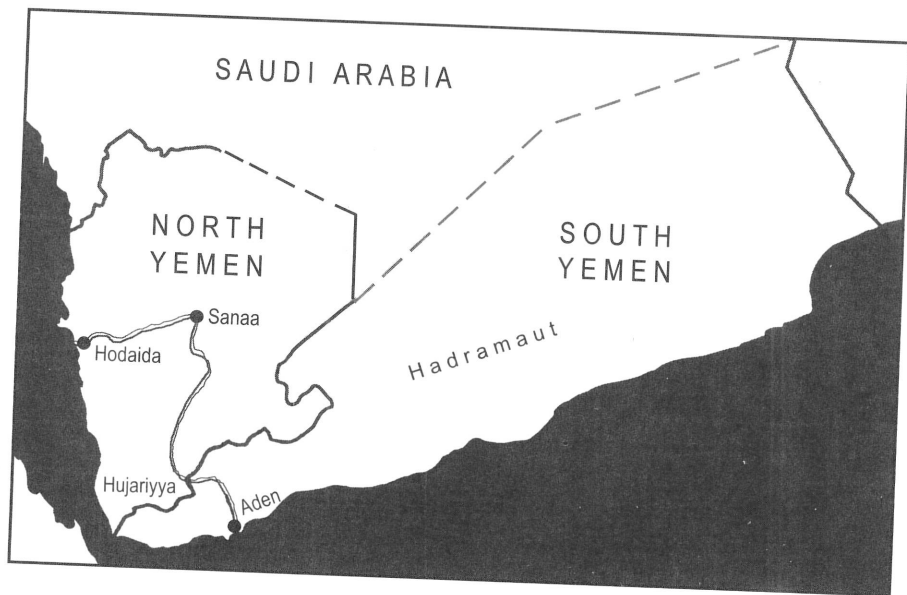
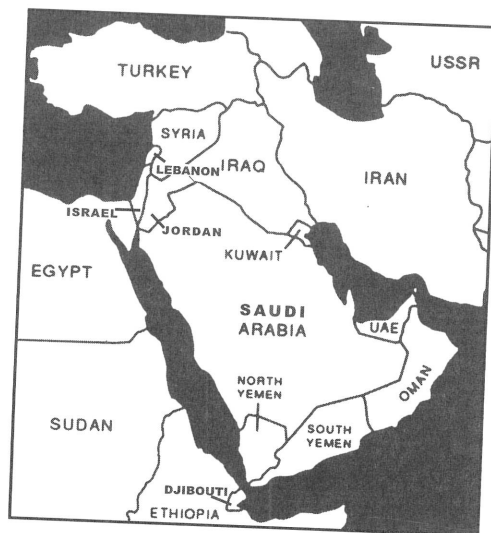


They Die Strangers



A novella and stories from Yemen

Mohammad Abdul-Wali



Yemen during the period of
Abdul-Wali's stories (1950s – 1960s)

Introduction

Mohammad Abdul-Wali is admired in his paternal homeland of North Yemen¹ as a pioneer of fiction writing. Prior to the 1960s, when his stories were first published, the literature of North Yemen mainly consisted of works of religious scholarship, histories, geographies, and biographies that looked to the past and idealized the achievements of the political and religious elite. Abdul-Wali's work marked a radical break from these traditional genres by focussing on contemporary themes, and by describing with vivid and compassionate realism the lives of ordinary people, especially the oppressed and socially marginal. This focus must first be understood in relationship to Abdul-Wali's own social background and tragically brief life.

Mohammad Ahmad Abdul-Wali² was born in Ethiopia in 1940, and spent his childhood there. His mother was Ethiopian, and his father, Ahmad, was an émigré from North Yemen. His background made the author a *muwallad*, or "person of mixed blood." This birth status undoubtedly sensitized Abdul-Wali to the race issue, which is a subtext in several stories where skin color is mentioned, and is a major theme in the two stories in which muwallads prominently figure ("On the Road to Asmara," and "They Die Strangers").

Ahmad Abdul-Wali, who was probably a shopkeeper, endeavored to maintain his son's Muslim and Yemeni identity in the Christian-African environment of Ethiopia. He sent him to the Yemeni Community School in Addis Ababa, where two of the stories here appear to be set. Then in 1954, when his son was about fourteen, he sent him to an institute for Islamic studies in Aden in South Yemen,³ and married him to his cousin. (Cousin marriage is common in Yemen, as is marriage near puberty.) This was Abdul-Wali's first encounter with Yemen and its conditions. It was at

around this time, in his middle teens, that he claims to have begun writing.

In 1955, Abdul-Wali went to Cairo, where he attended colleges (one a school of Al-Azhar University) and developed Marxist sympathies. The latter is consistent with the passionate and idealistic preoccupation with social and political injustice in his writings, and helps us understand his subsequent turbulent career. He was expelled from Egypt for political reasons, visited Yemen again, then went to Moscow where he learned Russian and attended a literature course at the Gorki Institute. When the republican revolution took place in Yemen in late 1962, he returned to his country and joined the diplomatic service of the newly created Yemen Arab Republic, serving as Chargé d'Affaires in Moscow, then in East Berlin until he was expelled for allegedly spying in 1967. Back in Yemen, which was still in a state of civil war, he was briefly Director General of Aviation. Thereafter, he fell out with his government politically and spent two long stints in prison. After his second incarceration he fled to Aden, which was by then under a Marxist regime.⁴

In 1973, Abdul-Wali was killed in a plane crash while flying from Aden to Hadramaut in South Yemen with a group of Yemeni intellectuals and politicians. He left a Swedish wife, whom he had married after the death of his Yemeni wife, and several children.

The stories collected in this volume are all set either in Ethiopia or in North Yemen, specifically in or near the Hujariyyah in the south where his father originated. Their principal themes are the difficult political conditions in Yemen in the 1950s and 1960s, and the problems of long-term emigration. To appreciate the stories fully, it is therefore also necessary to understand something of this background.

The Hujariyyah is a mountainous region of farmers and traders in the far south of North Yemen. From the late nineteenth century, the Hujariyyah was the main area of emigration from North Yemen—mainly because of local poverty and the proximity of the port of Aden, only one long day's walk away. Most men left to seek work, and some to escape political oppression. The majority of migrants were uneducated, took unskilled jobs

in Aden itself, and returned home regularly for Muslim festivals and other important events. Others took menial jobs on ships and were often at sea for years. And some, mainly single, men settled permanently abroad—in ports where their ships had docked or in cities where they could work in industry or trade. Men lived frugally abroad, and most remitted as much as they could to support the families they had left behind and to finance capital projects such as house-building or setting-up shops back in their villages. The whole point of enduring the usually gruelling work and long separations was to help those left behind. As a result of generations of emigration, there are communities of expatriate North Yemenis throughout the Middle East and in France, England, Wales, the USA, and Ethiopia.⁵

In the 1930s, when Abdul-Wali's father Ahmad presumably emigrated to Ethiopia. The ruler of North Yemen, the Zaydi imam⁶ Yahya Hamiid al-Diin, was ruthlessly consolidating his state in the aftermath of the Ottoman occupation (which ended in 1918). The imam employed especially harsh taxation and policing methods in the southern, Shaafi`ii (Sunni) part of his domain, including the Hujariyyah. The inhabitants of the Hujariyyah lacked the strong tribal organization of the north or powerful leaders, and could not resist the brutalities of Zaydi rule. But resentment grew, and in the late 1930s, leading Hujariyyans helped found The Free Yemeni Movement (FYM), referred to in the stories as The Liberals Party.⁷ This loose association opposed Imam Yahya's isolationist policies, and pressed for political reform and economic change in North Yemen, which was then almost totally undeveloped. Most of the population lived in squalid conditions in small, scattered villages without running water, electricity, or modern educational and health facilities, and all travel was on foot or by animal. The FYM's mainly intellectual activities were partly financed by contributions from expatriate Yemenis, including those across the Red Sea in Ethiopia as mentioned in *They Die Strangers.*, and Abdul-Wali's father was a supporter.

Imam Yahya was assassinated in 1948,⁸ but the situation in Yemen improved little under the rule (1948-62) of his son and successor, Imam Ahmad, who perpetuated his father's strict policies. He did, however, agree

to a few development projects being effected with foreign aid. The most spectacular of these was the construction of the first surfaced road in Yemen, which was built by the Chinese and climbed from the port of Hodeidah on the Red Sea coast (Tihamah) through steep, rugged mountains to the capital, Sanaa, on the high plateau. This extraordinary engineering feat, which Abdul-Wali perhaps saw during his first visit to Yemen in the 1950s, figures in "The Chinese Road."

In 1962, the thousand-year-old Zaydi imamate was finally overthrown in a military coup, and the Yemen Arab Republic was established. There followed eight years of civil war between republicans and royalists in which the republicans were victorious. Revolution also took place in South Yemen. The British left in 1967 and were replaced by the Marxist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. In 1990, North and South Yemen unified to create the present Republic of Yemen.

The stories translated in this volume have a strong autobiographical feel. Most are written in the first person by a male narrator, and all describe situations which Abdul-Wali probably personally experienced, observed, or heard about firsthand.

These are intimate tales. Most focus on one main character or two usually contrasting characters, and describe a single main event or encounter. Much use is made of dialogue to expose ideas and feelings, and of weather to create mood and reflect emotions. And the stories are set in vividly drawn landscapes and places. All this gives them a powerful sense of immediacy and authenticity. The reader should bear in mind, however, that Abdul-Wali mainly wanted to spotlight people in forlorn or stressful circumstances, and he does so extremely movingly, but he thereby leaves much in the dark. He ignores the variegated nature of Yemeni and Ethiopian society. He also focuses on individuals to the exclusion of their social nexus, leading to a distorted depiction of their situations. It is striking, for example, that the stories set in Addis Ababa give scarcely a glimpse of its cosmopolitan life, and that most of the Ethiopian characters in the stories are prostitutes. It could be argued that it was Yemenis not Africans he chiefly wanted to depict, but here too he bends reality to his purpose. In "Nothing New" and "The Land, Salma," for example, he portrays village

women as lonely and socially isolated because their husbands are away. This ignores the fact that Yemeni village women are supported by dense networks of relatives and neighbors, and lead intense social lives among themselves, regardless of the presence or absence of their husbands. Yemeni men abroad and at home are also part of active communities, and spend much time in social gatherings, often chewing *qat*.⁹ Also conspicuous by their absence are joyful or family events, or the exuberance and sense of humor that are such dominant features of Yemeni culture. The melancholy, brooding loners who people these stories should not, therefore, be taken in any sense as "typical" Yemenis.

Abdul-Wali was primarily writing for fellow Yemenis, who would have implicitly understood his often subtle cultural and political references and the contexts of his stories. However, they require some explanation for western readers unfamiliar with Yemen.

The first eight of the stories collected in this volume are set in Yemen. The first story, "The Ghoul," relates a fable that invites an obvious political interpretation and sets the scene for the others. The ghoul, or evil spirit, who lives in the mountain cave and terrorizes the village surely symbolizes the imam of North Yemen and the despotic imamate (especially since the last imam, al-Badr, was sheltered in caves during the civil war). If so, then the ghoul's destruction at the hands of the poor, brave mariner's widow represents the demolition of the imamate in the republican revolution of 1962. And the revival of her sick son—"the man of tomorrow"—by the ghoul's gory death, must symbolize Yemen's renaissance as a republic.

The arrogant policeman in "Brother, Are You Going to Fight Them All?", with his gun slung over his shoulder, traditional clothing, and bare feet, represents one of the northern tribesmen whom the Hamiid al-Diin imams employed as mercenaries to enforce their rule in southern Shaafi'i areas such as the Hujariyyah. Southerners feared and detested these men, whose religious and social loyalties lay elsewhere, and who were sometimes brutal. But their harsh methods ultimately derived from the government. One of the most deeply resented was the obligation to extract their daily wages from the people they were sent to deal with, regardless of the latter's guilt or innocence.¹⁰ These are the "dues" demanded in the story.

In "Ya Khabiir," we meet a similarly attired, barefoot soldier chewing qat. He is identified as being from the tribal region of Hashid, but this story undermines and softens the southern stereotype of the fierce northern tribesman. Where the other is portrayed as an anonymous executor of the arbitrary cruelty of government power, this one is humanized and made a mouthpiece for discontent with the imamate. The soldier chases after a lawyer walking home through the mountains. The lawyer fears the worst because of the brutality his village has experienced from his kind, but the soldier just wants a companion. He guides the lawyer along the path, and on the way helps him understand that he is a victim as well as an instrument of the system. He explains that he was forced into this work because *shaykhs* (tribal leaders) took his land, and complains that he has not seen his family for years. He also denies that all soldiers loot and steal, and points out that the Governor takes more than they (meaning in taxes). By dusk the men are friends and pray together, and the soldier cracks a self-deprecating joke, forbidding the lawyer to tell anyone that a soldier forced him to pray at gunpoint.

"The Color of Rain" takes place in the mountains of southern Yemen during the 1962–70 civil war. Two contrasting Yemeni characters sit admiring the moonlit scenery. One, the narrator, is a young man from Aden, who shivers in the unaccustomed cold, and thinks longingly of the bride he has left in the care of his family. He is a novice fighter, and scared. His companion is a lonely old salt, toughened by twenty years of laboring on ships and in mines and fighting for the Italians and British (in the Second World War). During the story, a brief, shockingly violent incident occurs which scarcely interrupts the men's musings or the reader's reading. We are thus made complicit in the casual, anonymous cruelty of war.

"The Saturday Market" is set before the departure of the British from South Yemen. A young man is journeying from Aden to the Hujariyyah to celebrate a Muslim festival (*eid*) with his wife and new baby, born while he was abroad. His car has broken down, so he is travelling on foot (like generations of migrant workers returning home, though this is not said). The landscape is beautiful and the mountains of the Hujariyyah beckon. He arrives at a busy market on the border between South and North Yemen,

and surveys the hills of the Subayhi "tribesmen." A British flag flies from a nearby guard-post, and he remembers the Subayhis they have shot, and how revenge shootings continue still.¹¹ His reverie ends, and he is overwhelmed by the sights, sounds, and smells of the market, which stoke his anxiety to get home. "Black" faces are mentioned, who are peddlers of African ancestry. Rutting male donkeys are untied and allowed to get at their mates. Their female keeper glances at him suggestively, then leaves. A dancer from Tihamah arouses his lust and self-disgust. The sun beats mercilessly down. It all becomes too much. When the market ends at midday, people leave with their bundles. But he remains, still wondering how to get home. The evocation of volatile emotions and desperate, impotent entrapment suggests that this tale might be an allegory of prison life.

In "The Chinese Road," Abdul-Wali views this momentous engineering project through the incredulous eyes of a naive laborer in Tihamah. He watches the Chinese affectionately, marvelling as they nimbly scale the heights and explode mountains to drive the road through to Sanaa. And he compares them favorably to the other foreigners he has worked for—the red-faced people (i.e. Western development experts) who slept in tents, drank a lot and "took notes," but achieved nothing. He has never been to Sanaa, but we know he soon will. The first roads changed more than the revolution.

The last two stories based in Yemen return to the theme of long-term emigration, and take a female perspective on the plight of wives left behind in their villages while their men work abroad. Layla's husband, in "Nothing New," has been away a year working in American coal mines. She longs for his return, but fears his ship has sunk in the war (presumably the Second World War), or that he has found another wife. His remittances have dried up, taxes and poor harvests have impoverished her, and she is exhausted from caring for the fields and animals and their baby son. Her cousin is better off because her husband is only in Aden. Then the camel caravan arrives from Aden (this is before roads), bearing letters, gifts, and money from her husband. But other waiting women get nothing, pre-saging the heart-rending ending.

In "The Land, Salma," Abdul-Wali uses a disembodied voice to interrogate the heroine and reveal her innermost feelings. Salma's husband has been overseas for five years, and has only returned once to impregnate her with a son he does not even know about. Salma worries, like Layla, that her husband might marry someone else and never return. Like many women in the Hujariyyah, she is doing traditionally "male" tasks on top of "female" household chores in the absence of her man, and is disappointed that her working life did not improve after she joined her husband's family at marriage. She also worries about ageing, and fantasizes about illicit love. But she finally finds comfort and salvation in her devotion to the land.

The rest of the stories are based in Ethiopia, and view long-term emigration from the émigré's perspective. Four are cameos of expatriate Yemeni children's lives in Addis Ababa. Both "Abu Rupee" and "The Slap" are narrated by an eleven-year-old boy called Sa'id who attends "the community school." "Abu Rupee" describes Sa'id's awakening by a misfit. The boy dreams of becoming a merchant and helping the poor. Then he befriends Abu Rupee, a wise fool who wanders the streets drawing caricatures on walls for a rupee. Abu Rupee scorns money and despises his fellow Yemenis who have abandoned their country and women to seek wealth. Merchants forget their youthful ideals, he says, and let their poor (like him) be derided by the foreigners they live among. Overcome by nostalgia, he draws the boy a picture of Yemen and extols its beauty and famous past, urging him to go there. The boy decides to become an artist, and Abu Rupee disappears. The story concludes with a poignant re-encounter in Aden, five years later.

In "Abu Rupee," Sa'id's father is in the background, doing the accounts; in "The Slap," he is cutting up cardboard to cover notebooks he sells. Sa'id infuriates him by giving an Ethiopian customer too much change. He angrily reminds his son how lucky he is to be supported and getting an education, when *he*, by contrast, had to support his parents and left his country to improve his son's prospects. Sa'id has obviously heard all this before. He is more worried about whether he can persuade his father to pay for a uniform he must wear at school for the anniversary of Emperor Haile Selassie's coronation.

"The Last Class," like "Abu Rupee," is about losing a treasured relationship and longing for the homeland. A class of boys in fifth grade are stunned at the imminent loss of a beloved Yemeni teacher who made them love and yearn for the country they have never seen. "A Woman" is about adolescent sexual desire. The fourteen-year-old narrator walks through a red-light district in Addis Ababa, and is inflamed by an Ethiopian prostitute who bestows on him a free kiss. Abdul-Wali uses African prostitutes in several stories to represent the moral danger, as he sees it, of expatriate life in Ethiopia, and portrays them as jolly, sassy, blatantly erotic women in charge of their lives, in contrast to Yemeni village women whom he depicts as sad, repressed, abandoned victims.

The remaining stories focus on experiences and encounters of different types of Yemeni men. "On the Road to Asmara" is about the difficulty of maintaining Yemeni identity in Africa. The narrator is a Yemeni muwallad stuck waiting for transport in a flyblown Ethiopian settlement of shacks and bars that grew up to service the Italians and is now in decline. He fends off prostitutes and falls into conversation with a Yemeni shopkeeper chewing qat like himself. Each evaluates the other's situation. The shopkeeper guesses the narrator is a muwallad, and envies him belonging to Africa by birth. The narrator, for his part, is appalled at the way the shopkeeper's Yemeni identity is fading away. The latter admits that, after thirty years in Ethiopia, he is probably forgotten back in Yemen. He is also letting his muwallad children lose their Muslim religion. He has sent them to a Christian school, and they can only speak Amharic, the main language in Ethiopia. And he is even starting to forget his Arabic.

The Yemeni shopkeeper, Abdou Sa'id, who is the central character of the novella *They Die Strangers*, provides a striking contrast to the shopkeeper stranded on the road to Asmara. Where the latter has lost his connections with Yemen and assimilated, Abdou Sa'id has struggled to maintain his links with Yemen, where he left a wife (whose face he cannot remember) and child, and devotes his life to the dream of returning in triumph as a wealthy man. He works nonstop, and lives in squalor in the back of his shop in Addis Ababa so he can send all his profits home. By the time we first meet him, over ten years into his sojourn, his remittances

have paid for a magnificent house to be built back in his village. His obsession with his goal makes him shun any relationships that might enmesh him in the local community, including those with Yemenis; he does not even contribute, like others, to The Free Yemeni Movement (the Liberals Party). His only human contacts are over the counter with customers, and with dispensable sexual partners. Unlike the Yemenis in the other stories, who resist the allure of African women and hate themselves for being tempted, he is an uninhibited, guilt-free satyr, notorious for sleeping with local prostitutes and fathering children he never acknowledges. Even his one regular relationship, with the rich wife of an important official, is self-ish—for the tax-man is after him and she might get her husband to intercede.

One day an event occurs that threatens all his plans. The Muslim mother of one of his bastards dies, and her Christian friend, also a prostitute as the mother had been, begs Abdou Sa'id to accept responsibility for his destitute son. Despite the fact that she once gave him her virginity, and that as a Muslim he has a duty to prevent his son being raised by Christians and among prostitutes, he refuses her blandishments. In desperation, she asks a Yemeni *sayyid* (descendant of the Prophet Muhammad) to intercede. Abdou Sa'id now takes some sideswipes at the pretensions and self-interested manipulations of the religious elite. The *sayyid* seizes the chance to enhance his own reputation for piety and closeness to God, while delegating the actual hard work of dealing with the problem to a *hajji* (one who has visited Mecca). He thus preserves his own superior detachment from the world, and continues to sit in self-imposed confinement, receiving the gifts people lavish on him in gratitude for his religious services. He tells the *hajji*, a pillar of the local Yemeni community, that he has learned about this problem directly from God, and that He wants the *hajji* to be His instrument in persuading Abdou Sa'id to do his religious duty. The self-important *hajji* is ecstatic to receive this honor, and bustles about in search of the culprit. One of the rare comic moments in the book is when he bursts in on an acquaintance of Abdou Sa'id, who assumes the *hajji* is hunting for subscriptions to the Liberal Party again. When he eventually tracks him down, he also fails to move the flinty Abdou Sa'id, who decides to bring

forward his long-cherished plan and escape immediately to Yemen. But (divine?) punishment foils him, and the boy is saved (and Abdou Sa'id's sins are redeemed) by the *hajji*'s saintly assistant.

They Die Strangers is Abdul-Wali's most cautionary and didactic tale. Like many of the stories in this collection, it dwells on the negative aspects of long-term emigration: the anguish of long separations from families and homeland, the loneliness and moral hazards of living in an alien culture, and the tension between the emigrant's desire to assimilate in the host country and his yearning to return. But, where other characters strive to preserve their Yemeni identity and Muslim values in the context of an African and Christian environment, and regret their lapses and compromises, Abdou Sa'id emphatically does neither. He is an extreme example of a "fallen" émigré who ruthlessly betrays the ideals of his native culture and religion without remorse, fatally corrupted by his selfish, materialistic goal. By inflicting on him such a tragic end and denying him absolution, Abdul-Wali delivers an uncompromising verdict on the dangers and delusions, as he saw them, of Yemeni men living abroad alone.

Shelagh Weir

¹ By North Yemen I refer to the region which was the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen until the overthrow of its theocratic rulers, the Hamiid al-Diin imams, in the republican coup of 1962, when it became The Yemen Arab Republic.

² I have derived most of the following biographical information about Abdul-Wali from Günther Orth's well-researched introduction to his book on the modern Yemeni short story: "*Di Farbe des Regens*": *Entstehung und Entwicklung der modernen jemenitischen Kurzgeschichte*, Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1997, 80-83. I am grateful to Iris Glosemeyer for alerting me to the existence of this book, and for kindly sending me photocopies of

the latter pages. In the rest of his book, which I have been unable to see, Orth discusses nine of Abdul-Wali's short stories, including four that are included in this volume ("Abu Rupee," "The Land, Salma," "The Color of Rain," and "On the Road to Asmara"). I also obtained biographical information from the translators of this volume, and from Salma Jayyusi's *The Literature of Modern Arabia*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988.

³ By South Yemen I mean what was at that time the British-controlled Aden Protectorates, and later became the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. The institute was founded by Muhammad Salim al-Bayhani, a graduate of al-Azhar University in Cairo and a leading religious scholar in Aden in the 1950s. The institute closed in 1967 (See Abdullah Ahmed Muheirez, "Cultural Development in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen," in B. R. Pridham (ed), *Economy, Society and Culture in Contemporary Yemen*, London: Croom Helm, 1985, 209).

⁴ The People's Democratic Republic of Yemen.

⁵ For an account of Yemeni communities in Britain, see Fred Halliday, *Arabs in Exile: Yemeni Migrants in Urban Britain*, London: I.B.Taurus, 1992. For Yemenis in the USA, see Jonathan Friedlander (ed), *Sojourners and Settlers: the Yemeni Immigrant Experience*, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988.

⁶ Zaydism is a branch of Shi'ah Islam, and the religious and temporal rulers of the Zaydi state in Yemen were entitled *imam*.

⁷ See J. Leigh Douglas, *The Free Yemeni Movement: 1935-1962*, Beirut: American University in Beirut, 1987.

⁸ Members of the Free Yemeni Movement were involved in plotting Imam Yahya's assassination in 1948, and in the military coup of 1962.

⁹ *Qat* is a mildly stimulant leaf chewed by most Yemenis in afternoon social gatherings, and by travellers and workers to increase their alertness

(see Shelagh Weir, *Qat in Yemen: Consumption and Social Change*, British Museum Press, 1985). Abdul-Wali uses qat to symbolize Yemeni identity in several stories.

¹⁰ This notorious system of punitive policing and billeting was called *tanfidh*.

¹¹ The Subayhis live in the hills and coastal plain south of the old border between North and South Yemen, and their territory is traversed by trade routes between Aden and the Hujariyyah. The Subayhis looted caravans and traded in arms activities, which the British and their local allies tried to control or suppress by force of arms (see R. J. Gavin, *Aden Under British Rule: 1839-1967*, London: Hurst, 1975).

The Ghoul

The winds are blowing hard outside, sweet girl. Come nearer. I want to tell you a tale... Listen to me carefully. This is a story that I heard when I was a small boy, and all the boys in my village have heard it by now, for it's the story of our victory. It's about the ghoul in our mountain.

I don't know when the story began, but they say that a ghoul came to our mountain, where he found a terrible, large cave. Today this cave has become a place for lovers. In this cave, sweet girl, I met my first love, and had my first kiss...

Inside this big, terrible cave used to live the ghoul; nobody knew where he came from, nor why or how. Nobody saw him as he captured his victims, but everybody saw their remains, traces of his many crimes, on the road between our village and the mountain. The people of my village wove myths around him. It was said that he couldn't die, that he wasn't affected by bullets, and that he came to our mountain to take revenge on us, because God was angry with us...

What nonsense did they utter? They repeated all sorts of things among themselves, but they are to be excused for they are ignorant. You know that the people of our village are cowards when they are alone, but bold as lions when they are united.

Many things were said that added to their fears. Can you imagine that? They made up the stories and later they believed them. The ghoul soon became the unchallenged king of the mountain. Every morning the ghoul sent from his cave the bones of his victims, miserable animals or humans whose fates drove them to his jaws and could not be saved. On dark nights, the ghoul would attack our village, break into the livestock pens, carry off whatever he wanted, and return to the mountain. Nobody could stand in his way... He was capable of anything, his power fueled by the myths that grew with every victim. The ghoul could not die, so how could they resist?

Why should they bother themselves with something that seemed to be so real? Why should they fight against their own legends?

As days passed, the ghouls' authority grew, as did the numbers of his victims. He became the king both of the mountain and of the village. He was said to own the souls of those who knelt before him.

As the days passed, new myths were spun and old wives tales revolved around the ghoul...and only the ghoul. Even the children used to repeat foolishly what old women said, and their gaze was always on the mountain.

The winds are blowing hard, the storm is on its way. There is no wood to burn. Oh, my sweet girl, come closer, closer. The ghoul made everything terrible, unbearable, unreal. The mountain changed into something mysterious, not to be controlled by humans.

Oh, the winds are cold, they remind me of the fear that invaded the minds of the villagers as they rushed to bolt their doors by sunset.

At that time, when the ghoul controlled everything, there was a woman, an ordinary woman—a mother who lived in the village. Her name was Hind.

Nobody cared about her, for she was very poor and people don't care much about the poor. She had lost everything, all that she owned: money, land, and jewelry. She had lost everything for the sake of her only son. Yes, sweet girl, she had a son, ten years old, whom her husband had left behind when he died at sea. He was one of the country's courageous adventurers that exist everywhere. Our country's sailors, my sweet girl, made a glorious history for us, a forgotten history that no one knows except the sea itself. Oh, how great are those who die quietly after leaving behind tragedies. He died leaving his wife and child alone. The child became sick, and Hind had to sell all that she owned for medicine. She prayed and prayed, visited the tombs of all the saints, but the gates of heaven did not want prayers or visits to saints; they wanted a deed performed. Hind, the poor woman, didn't know that. Slowly she lost everything. Nothing was left but one thing: her body. She wanted to sell it in the slave market, but our village, as any other small village in our country, did not have a slave market. Be-

sides, she had no great beauty... Oh, Lord, she was an ordinary woman, without any beauty—all she had was her heart, her work, her struggle.

She lost hope. She could do nothing but sit next to her child, cleaning his jaundiced face with her tears.

Are the winds still blowing outside, sweet girl? I'm not finished with the story yet.

If there is something remarkable about great people, it is that they act without planning. Hind started to shift between reality and fantasy. As tears streamed down her face, she dreamed that the medicine for her son was there in the cave, in the mountain where the ghoul sleeps, that it was in the black heart of the ghoul, that heart which was filled with the blood of so many others. In that heart lay the medicine.

Hind didn't think. She just found herself in front of the cave's mouth without knowing how she got there. She was moved by that mysterious power, the power of motherhood, which cannot be expressed or described with our simple words. Hind—the broken-hearted, poor, and frail woman—found herself alone at the door of the ghoul whose terror conquered the hearts of all the men in our village.

And in so doing, Hind killed the myth. The ghoul could not believe that a human being would dare to violate his territory and come to his cave. It was a challenge to the creature's power and reputation. Enraged, the ghoul stood to his full height and was astonished to see a short pale woman, so weak and emaciated she was about to collapse. That enraged the ghoul further, to discover that the trespasser was a mere woman, and not some other, stronger being. His pride was sorely wounded.

But Hind was not scared; rather, her power and daring increased when she saw the ghoul's ugly face. She gathered her courage, determined not to leave unless she was carrying the ghoul's heart in her hands, victorious.

The sun shone down strongly, the trees danced, and the small birds sang as they saw this woman challenging fate and breaking down myths that others had created.

"Why are you here, old woman?" the ghoul asked.

"Oh, ghoul, whatever you are and regardless of your power, I am a mother searching for medicine for my son. I know the cure is nothing

more or less than your heart, so I came to seize it whether you like it or not.”

All of the anger of the world at that moment gathered in the face of the ghoulish as he heard the woman’s words. Who was she to challenge him?

“Oh, you old woman, listen to me. You are the first to ever break my peace and challenge my strength. I vow to destroy you and make you a laughing stock. I will not leave a trace of you on this earth.”

But Hind had come this far in breaking through the myth and she felt she must fight on for her son.

If she became frightened or begged for mercy, that would mean her end, so she ignored what the ghoulish had just said. She smiled sarcastically, hatred for that grotesque creature which spread fear everywhere glimmered in her eyes.

“You’re just a base creature who was created by people who weave a lie you chose to believe. As for me, I’ll get your heart whether you let me do it quietly or not!”

The ghoulish tried to laugh, but his laughter was dead, cold, and he felt he should do something before he crumbled under her bold gaze.

“Old woman, you don’t know how to evaluate your strength; perhaps madness drove you to this adventure. Out of mercy, I’ll forgive you this time. Don’t forget whose presence you are in, the super-powerful one who is feared by all, the king of the mountain and the village, the victorious, the one who never dies...”

He knew he was lying, and so did Hind.

“Who are you for us to fear? Who are you that we must surrender to you and put our necks under your feet?”

Hind began to walk towards the heart of the ghoulish. Terror gathered all at once in the face of the ghoulish; yes, terror—*not* courage...

Alarmed, the ghoulish fearfully attacked. Hind did not falter, but grabbed him with her hands, her eyes shining.

Oh, if you could only understand the epic courage of the woman as she struggled for the sake of tomorrow, so that others could live happily!

Oh, sweet girl, if you could only have seen Hind when she fought that ghoulish, that myth which fell apart, in order to get back to her son and to give him life.

The world was asking: Who will win? The human or the ghoulish? Birds stopped singing, the sun became yellowish, as though holding its breath in the sky, trees stopped rustling, the winds were still. Even the mountain, which belonged to the ghoulish, held its heart in its hands waiting for its liberation...

Blood ran, sweet girl; the ghoulish let out a final shriek and collapsed, defeated. Nature sang the song of salvation, the great song. The mountain poplars danced to the rhythm of the wind, and birds sang. The sun extended its golden hands, saluting Hind’s victory.

Hind stood up. Her black dress was torn to shreds, and blood was splattered all over her young body... Her body was the most beautiful in the world at that moment, for it was full of power... Her straight black hair, which she had never taken care of, hung loose over her shoulders, drops of blood dripping from it. She looked around her as she clutched the ghoulish’s heart in her hands. She began to walk very fast back to the village, to her son. Everything around her was singing and dancing. Next to the mouth of the cave lay the king of yesterday. In a dark corner inside the village, in a humble broken home, the man of tomorrow was stirring.

The storm is over, sweet girl, and my story has ended, too...

Let us embrace one another. We won. Oh, sweet girl, the sun is sending its golden rays on our mountain. The sky is laughing joyfully. Let us smile... Let us smile...

Brother, Are You Going to Fight Them All?

It happened in the morning. I was so tired that morning, I didn't go to work. I was sure my wife and children would go to my father's house, and I was looking forward to being alone, enjoying an ordinary day away from the children's noise and play, and away from work.

As they left, I hurried back to bed. The weather was cold, and my bed was nice and warm.

Moments passed and I began to dream of a quiet, wonderful day of relaxation: perhaps I'd read something, after having quit reading for years. How could I read with four children around? Just one of them equaled a whole marketplace of commotion. And, I always came home from work very tired.

I heard knocking on the door. It started gently but soon grew stronger.

Perhaps, one of the neighbors was looking for something. But the knocking was followed by a voice that was harsh and demanding; I trembled. I climbed out of bed and cursed my attempt at rest, which seemed doomed from the very start. I began to wish my wife and children hadn't left.

I opened the door. A man stood there, his gun slung over his shoulder. His sarong was as short as a mini-skirt, and on his head was a turban as high as the sky. I noticed that he was barefooted.

"Come to the police station."

I was surprised by his harsh tone. "What's the matter?" I asked.

Without even looking at me, he barked: "I said, come with me to the police station."

"But why? What for?"

He shouted back, "Come now!"

I felt my blood start to boil inside me. I slammed the door in his face and said, "For God's sake, go away and don't shout at me. I have no problems with anyone."

But, he began knocking again, and, this time, the knocking was even more intense. The voice was getting louder, shouting even. "This man is cursing the government...humiliating the government representative; everyone bear witness. He slammed the door in the face of government!"

So I went out with him. Children had gathered, and then women, followed by some men, who all looked at us curiously. The soldier didn't give me a chance to talk, but grabbed me by the collar. I lost my composure. "Oh, Muslims, bear witness, this man is attacking me in my home. My God, there is no more sanctity in this country!"

He shouted, "Who told you to humiliate the government? Who do you think you are?"

People tried to intervene. Words flew back and forth. Everyone was trying to find a solution, without even knowing what was going on...

After some moments of total confusion, the soldier himself was beginning to become a victim; people were begging him to be nice to me—and begging me to cooperate.

I heard voices yelling excitedly.

"Go with him to the police station."

"Why don't you want to go? Do you have something to fear?"

"He's the government representative and so you should go with him."

I shouted back, "Listen, everyone! I'm the one victimized here! There's no dispute between me and anybody else. So why did this soldier knock on my door this morning? I don't know what's going on."

One friend shouted at me, "Why did you slam your door on him? Who are you? Who do you think you are to resist a government representative? Or do you think there is no government? I swear, if these people weren't around, you'd see what I'd do to you."

People intervened again...

"Oh, Faarea, come on," they said to me. Let's go together to the police station and see what's the matter..."

I found myself in my pajamas going with the soldier, who walked in front of me, his head raised victoriously. A group of adults and children followed, whistling and laughing.

We arrived at the police station, and I found myself surrounded by a group of friends who had heard what happened. I became a toy in their hands; each took me from one office to the other, until we made it to the proper official. I was miserable.

"What's the matter," the official asked.

"This man refused your summons, sir," answered the soldier. "And he cursed and called the government bad names and humiliated me in front of these people." He pointed to the crowd that had come with us.

Without asking anybody what was going on, the police chief shouted at me. "Who do you think you are? Put the handcuffs on his hands and imprison him." The soldier started to push me again.

But, my neighbors intervened. They begged the officer to wait. They said, "He's a good man, a father of many children; he was tired; he didn't mean anything..."

The police officer was finally convinced and asked to have me returned to him. The cuffs were still on my hands, and my clothes were torn.

"What's your name?"

"Faarea Ali Saed."

"Why did you refuse to come?"

"I swear, I didn't. All I said was that there was nothing between me and anybody else, no disputes or problems, and that I was surprised that he was asking me to go to the police station for no reason."

He turned to the soldier. "What do you want from him?"

"Sir, it was you who ordered me to bring him in."

The officer was surprised. "I...but how?"

He thought for a moment, then finally said, "Oh..."

He searched around for something, a notebook maybe, and said, "I asked you to bring Faarea Saed Ali, the butcher, whom the people complained about, for selling beef and claiming it's veal..." He turned to me and asked, "Are you a butcher?"

I shouted loudly, "I swear to God, I've never been a butcher in my life. I have a grocery store in the market, everyone knows that."

The officer turned to the soldier. "How did this happen?"

The soldier simply said, "Sir, I asked about Faarea Saed; they pointed to his house."

"But I told you he's a butcher..."

"I swear, I don't know, I asked and they said there he was," he said, pointing at me again.

Some of the people whistled; I was about to faint from fatigue.

Finally, the official said, pointing to me, "Undo his cuffs and let him go."

But the soldier asked, "Sir, what about my dues for bringing him in?"

The officer turned to me and said, "Give him the money and the cost of undoing the cuffs, and then go and may God look after you!"

I tried to say something, but one of my neighbors pushed me, and another whispered in my ear, "Brother, are you going to fight them all, or are you going to let God look after you?"

Ya Khabiir

I was on my way back from Hayfan after spending two days on a law case at the governor's office. As usual, I didn't get any results. The legal procedures would continue, but nothing would be resolved.

It was late in the day. I was walking alone, many worries gnawing at me. I had already chewed more than two bundles of sharari qat, which tossed and turned in my stomach. Although I usually don't like walking alone at night, especially for long distances, I had quelled my fear this time and hit the road with my stick while continuing to chew qat. I felt zeal and hate building up inside me. The cool evening breeze, water flowing into small ponds by the side of the mountain, and the vision of the valley in the distance were combining to create sad and revolutionary tunes in my mind.

"*Ya Khabiir! Ya Khabiir!*" [an address of respect for a learned professional]

I turned and cursed the voice that broke my solitary thoughts. Then I trembled slightly when I saw a man. He ran after me barefooted, wearing a short sarong and carrying a gun. His eyes were red from chewing qat.

"Where are you going, ya khabiir?" [An address of respect for a learned professional.]

"To Qutabah," I answered, a sense of loathing filling me. As much as I hated death, I detested soldiers even more.

"Then we're on our way together!"

I continued on my way, followed by the soldier. All the thoughts in my head vanished; only the sound of the soldier's footsteps remained as they forcefully hit the earth. I turned back from time to time to look at him. Adrenaline began to rush through my blood. I hate soldiers. I fear them and have never walked with any of them. Common stories that spread throughout our village about their savage and brutal violence now led me

to believe that this man intended to kill me. What would prevent him from doing so? He might think that I had a lot of money. What would stop him from doing away with me? There was no one here to see us. The road was deserted. We had reached the middle of the mountain, and the nearest houses were far away at the bottom of the valley or at the top of the mountain. He had a gun while I had nothing but a thin stick.

The idea began to grow in my thoughts so much that I imagined seeing the soldier take his gun off his shoulder; I imagined the sound of his footsteps to be the sound his gun made as he cocked it to shoot. I stopped by the side of the road, pretending to pull out a thorn in my foot so that he would go ahead of me, but he stopped after a step or two and looked at me. I wished he would just go on, but he waited.

“Do you have a thorn?”

Then, as he looked up at the evening sky, he said thoughtfully, “It’s a bit dark. You won’t be able to see.”

I nodded my head in agreement.

He walked ahead of me this time and I could hear him breathe, letting out a pained sigh from time to time. He tried to hum a sad Sanaa tune, but soon he stopped and, instead, resumed sighing.

He was tall and broad-shouldered, with a tribal manliness about him. He looked as though he could carry the mountain on those shoulders. He swung the gun as if it were a feather. The thud of his feet on the ground was so strong that I imagined the earth to cry painfully.

“Why don’t you talk?”

“What do you want me to say?”

I was still afraid of him. I saw his head move as he put more qat in his mouth. From behind the clouds, the light of the moon crept softly. I heard the man’s voice; it was simple and deep, with some harshness of the northern accent.

“Ya Khabiiir, did you have a law case? My God, what’s it with you people from Hujariyyah, that makes you love going to court? Any one of you who has two coins in his pocket files a lawsuit. Why can’t you live in peace like the rest of God’s creatures without such headaches?”

As he was talking, he scratched his head as if he were contemplating a very difficult problem, then continued. “Or do you think that there’s jus-

tice only through the regional governor, and not through the local officials? Justice is dead; it was eaten by those with fat bellies. As for you, you civilians, you take a hundred or two hundred riyals and pour them right into the mouths of these fat bellies like bottomless pits. While *our* stomachs are empty, right?”

I couldn’t answer him, for the last thing I expected him to talk about was justice, courts, and fat bellies. We civilians had come to see the soldiers as a force for repression and injustice. They were the ones who carried out the governor’s orders. We Yemenis could never forget how the soldiers abused us.

But the soldier didn’t wait for my answer. He sucked on the qat in his mouth and said, “You live here in Qutabah and I live in Hashid. There I have a home, a family, a wife and children, thank God. But we have no money, no land. The sheiks took our land from us, and we became soldiers trying to get an income. They said there was gold in Hujariyyah. We came here. But, I swear to God, there is nothing here but greed, looting, and envy. Everybody here wants to rob his brother, his friend. Yes, you may have money, but you have no honesty, no morals, no love or care. I swear if I died back home it would be much better. At least then I would be near my wife and children. True, we would still be looking for work and be hungry. But we wouldn’t be filing lawsuits against each other. Those fat bellies only got fat with your money.”

As I neared him I asked, “Okay, but why do you loot and steal from people?”

He sighed deeply and said, “Loot and rob people? Not all soldiers loot and steal, Ya Khabiiir. But, I say that whoever does loot and steal is no worse than the governor. You give the governor one hundred riyals under the table, but if you give a soldier one riyal, you say the soldiers looted and robbed you. Look, the soldier is no different from you; another governor steals from him in his own hometown, both justly and unjustly.”

He stopped and looked at the sky; then he unloaded his gun from his shoulder and turned to me. He said, “It’s evening, time for the evening prayer. Will you be the imam and lead the prayer?”

“No, you lead the prayer.”

He smiled at me, as if we were close friends and said, "Now don't say later that a soldier led the prayers at gun point, okay?"

We laughed.

After the prayers, we continued on our way. All the while, he talked about everything, his wife whom he hadn't seen for three years, his children...

"Sir, I swear to God, I wish that my children would be educated and not become ignorant soldiers like me. But where are the schools? We only have a local fellow, a local teacher, a religious *faqeeh*. These people are even worse than governors. All they care about is money. As God is my witness, I tell you, they don't know the meaning of the Quran. They lie to us. They corrupt this world with their lies."

As we walked, the evening breeze blew gently on us, moving the plants to and fro. My friend talked about Hashid and Sanaa.

I saw my village in the distance, and before I knew what I was saying, I said, "Ya Khabiiir, you have a long way to go to reach Mafliiss, and this is a moonless night; you should stay with us and leave in the morning."

He studied me for some time and with a gentle smile on his lips said, "Hey civilian! I'm a soldier and we have needs—chicken, qat, a water pipe..."

"And a fee, too?" I quickly added.

He laughed at that.

As we entered the house my family looked at me fearfully. For if a soldier was with me, that meant a crisis and misery must be imminent.

The Chinese Road

Hundreds of bodies were bent forward, facing the ground, each carrying a load of heavy stones and rocks. The sun beating down on the carefully balanced loads made all the heads ache. The workers threw their loads down out of the way and rushed back quickly for more. The tall mountain lay proudly and quietly before the workers carving out the new road. Hands rose to wipe sweaty brows. The workers looked toward the foot of the mountain where some men had gathered to measure. They raised their heads toward the peak of the mountain and smiled. Then they turned back again to pickaxes that beat the earth and drills that whined as they cut violently into the rough rock.

Ali Tuhami raised his head for the hundredth time and looked at the mountain. He nodded as if something were bothering him, something that he couldn't digest. His fellow Yemenis were similarly perplexed. One of the foreign workers, short men with small eyes, which Tuhami imagined had been slit with a knife, passed in front of him. The man's glittering, black hair covered his forehead.

Ali Tuhami smiled as he saw the man running, thick ropes in his hands. The man looked like a sweet, lovable child. Actually, Ali considered that these short men were children, Certainly no more than ten years old. But the deeds they accomplished were greater than even Ali, a tribal man who had lived his forty years among Tuhama's sand, could believe. Ali lived behind the mountain with his tribal chief; they might battle for an *imam's* support or steal from a caravan, or they sailed on the Red Sea in small boats carrying anything and stopping in front of any seaport...

Ali was an adventurer. But those small children, who had come from China to help his countrymen build the first road across the mountains to the capital city Sanaa, which he had never seen, were more than adventurers. Those children, as far as he was concerned, were crazy.

He raised his head toward the sun. It sent back harsh burning rays, but his tall black body had gotten used to these rays. The mountain directly in front of him looked like a stumbling block in the road leading to Sanaa.

The mountain was rough rock, hard without any tracks of life. Ali watched as ropes were tied around the waists of the short men who, without delay, began to climb the mountain. His heart started to beat strongly and then everything became apparent. He had not been able to believe the news some days ago, when he heard that the Chinese were blowing up all of the mountains that hindered the road's straight path. But how could these madmen blow up a mountain, he had wondered.

The men climbed quickly, and many heads were raised upward toward them. Bodies stood erect and faces showed surprise as the people of the town saw for the first time in their lives men climbing the rocks like monkeys. Not only that, they were working as they went. The workers carried strange-looking shovels to make holes at the heart of the mountain. The short men's hands trembled from fatigue, but they did not stop walking. What strange, childlike men!

Ali remembered his days when he was a slave of "Hadi Haig." He worked with another group of strange people then. Their faces were always red and they sweated profusely and drank non-stop. He would watch them, while they watched him and all his coworkers as they planted their master's land together. Those men had tried to avoid Ali and the other servants as much as they could. They slept far away from the villages, in big white tents and sometimes in cars with armed guards around them. They carried long sticks and squinted when they looked at the desert, the sands, the huge mountains, and the green land that was green because of the work and the sweat of Ali and his people. These strangers did nothing but write on big white notepads. After a long time, they went away, leaving nothing behind but the hatred of his people.

Ali got closer to the mountain and watched the Chinese. They broke his heart over and over again. There was a big difference between them and the other strangers; Ali could see that. These were more serious in their work than those with red faces. Both groups were strangers to him. But these with whom he was working today were "work horses," as others would

often call them. They were not arrogant, nor did they try to avoid Ali and his colleagues; they all slept in the same camp with them and worked together. And they smiled and greeted everyone, even though it was in broken Arabic. They tried to help the farmers and cheerfully admired their labor. Ali remembered the accident on the road, when a boulder had fallen on one of the Yemeni laborers. A Chinese man had rushed quickly to help and had torn his shirt to tie up the man's wound; another came rushing with a medicine box. They had been very kind and helpful to the wounded man.

The Yemenis whispered together as they watched the men, hanging by ropes, moving over the rocks in all directions, working tirelessly. Some felt pity, others fearfully waited for the moment when one might fall. But the Chinese worked efficiently and silently. Ali could imagine the smiles on their faces and he smiled, too.

When work hours were over, the laborers returned to their camps. They were a strange mix—peasants, sailors, shepherds. This was the first time they had done such work—cutting through the mountain to pave a road between Hodaida and Sanaa.

The area where Ali Tuhami was working was one of the largest. Each team of workers had been assigned to a different region. The competition was stiff for which team would finish first. Tuhami's group was in the lead. Suddenly, he heard a noise and saw the laborers quickly disappear. Voices shouted, "A blast... a blast." Two Chinese men stood close to him, looking toward the mountain. Ali saw that the mountain had holes in its side... he got closer to the Chinese men. From far away came the sound of a huge explosion and the earth shook under his feet. Smoke and dust spread, and the mountain shook as it vomited all that was inside it. Moments passed.

Ali Tuhami could not believe what was happening. He could barely hear, and dust surrounded him. Smoke was filling his wide nostrils, his eyes were weeping, but through the tears he saw a big smile, on a small angelic face that had tiny black eyes and a fine nose.

When he fully opened his eyes, the mountain was no longer there...it had become a wide avenue filled with rocks, sand, and smoke. A small voice by his side said, "How is it?...Is it okay?"

He looked at the smiling face next to him. The man was pointing to the mountain that had vanished a moment ago. "The road is complete," he announced.

Tuhami nodded. At that moment all he wished was that his friends who farmed Hadi Haig's land were here to see what he had seen.

The Chinese man and Tuhami stood side by side, looking at the road in front of them. In the distance, the high peaks of other mountains appeared. He asked the Chinese man, "You, how old are you?"

The man's smile widened. He opened his hands three times. Ali couldn't believe it. Everything about the man made him seem no more than 20—his hair, his eyes, and especially his beardless chin.

Then the Chinese man asked, "You, how old are you?"

Ali opened his fists four times.

He walked Ali over to the explosion site. Ali was trying to understand some of what he was seeing. He stopped, pointing to the far-away mountain. The Chinese man understood, and raising his hands in the air, shouted: "All that... finish one day."

The two became friends. Still, several times, Ali mistakenly greeted some other Chinese; they all looked alike and all were smiling.

The teams continued to work quickly and efficiently, without stopping. Chinese experts worked beside them, carrying the shovels, digging and smiling. Their enthusiasm infected everybody. Ali Tuhami, who had once been Hadi Haig's servant, knew he could only admire and respect these strangers. He thought: "If they work this hard in our country, then imagine how they must work in their own country!"

The far-away mountain came closer; it, too, would have to be moved to make way for the road to Sanaa.

Ali's friend smiled as he climbed the new mountain. He shouted to Ali who was handing tools to him, "You and I are stronger than the mountain."

Ali was in awe. For the first time in his life, he realized that a man—actually he himself—could be stronger than the mountain. By the third, and then the fourth mountain, Ali Tuhami was up in front by his friend's side. The mountain rose once more to give way with a blast, opening the road, "China Road," as local people called it. Ali was in the front, the first Yemeni worker to help move the mountain and pave the road. Other Yemenis followed on other mountains, doing the same work as the Chinese, as Ali Tuhami. His Chinese friend smiled, saying, "Yemenis...all smart!"

Nothing New

Dedicated to: M.A.Gh. "My companion on the long road."

Laila didn't know the meaning of the word rest. Every part of her body ached. Work was draining her youth and draining the child that Modhesh had left inside her when he went away. Now, the young, emaciated child was crawling over the room's dirt floor, where a glimmer of light splashed in only by accident. The ancient house was built in the old Yemeni style. The windows were not big enough for a person to see through, but were good for shooting a gun out of. The house was as old as time. One story had collapsed a while back, but Laila made do with what remained. The only music she heard each day was the cow and the sheep in the barn and her own sighs. She managed with one room, just a corner really, using a mat covered by reeds and a torn blanket, its color lost under dust.

It was afternoon, and she went out to water the vegetables. It had rained very little that year. As soon as the plants began to turn green, they withered on the arid land. But, Laila continued to water them daily. Only a bit of grain remained in her store, barely enough to stave off the ghost of hunger. Still, hunger was her reality.

Laila heard her neighbor's voice as she passed in front of the house. She left her son chewing dirt as she spoke to her friend, who was stylishly attired in an almost new dress. From her headdress, which she wore only on special occasions, Laila knew that her neighbor was on her way to visit someone.

"Where are you off to, my cousin?"

The neighbor, as if trying to hide her joy, replied, "They say that the camel caravan leader has arrived from Aden."

Laila's heart suddenly began to beat faster. Perhaps a letter had arrived! Her neighbor offered, "Do you want me to ask if there's a letter for you?"

A long time had passed since Laila had heard from Modhesh; silence enveloped him wherever he was. The mail would not change how heart-sick she was, but maybe the caravan leader, with a word or some news could ease her mind?

She nodded in agreement. The neighbor didn't wait; she hurried off to the caravan leader's house. Laila said to herself, *She has the right to be happy, her husband lives in Aden*. Unlike her own husband, who had gone overseas to a faraway land.

Laila couldn't move. Her cow stood near the house. And, the shepherd had brought back her sheep. (She paid annually one quarter of the sheeps' value to the imam as *zaka*, or alms.

Her mind was on the caravan leader's house, with the happy, joyous women, as each of them at this moment were receiving their letters, money, gifts, and clothes.

She looked toward his home, longing to find out about the unknown. In her heart she felt almost certain that this time she would receive some news.

She went to her room where her son was still eating the dirt, his mouth and cheeks smeared with mud. She opened her old trunk and blew off the layers of dust that had accumulated on it. She wanted to take out the dress she wore during the feast, and a headdress that she had folded carefully. She had not worn these clothes for a long time, since the last feast. Modhesh had left during Ramadan two years ago. Her son, who was now crawling next to her, trying to see what was hidden in the wooden trunk, had been born three months after her husband left. Laila wrote that the boy was beautiful and looked just like him. Months later, Modhesh sent her clothes from a place called Ju'afan. He used to send money and clothes whenever he passed through ports. Then, suddenly, nothing. The returning migrants told her he was in a faraway country called America working in coal mines, and that when he returned, he would be carrying lots of money and clothes.

But Laila wanted *him*. She wrote and wrote, though she suspected many of her letters were lost on the way. A war was on, and many ships on which Yemenis worked sunk daily. Her fear grew.

The nights grew longer. She began to have many disturbing nightmares; perhaps he had sunk in a boat, perhaps he was sick, had gotten married, perhaps...

She closed the door. Her neighbor had not returned. The baby's mouth was open; his deep-sunken eyes and his jaundiced face peered at her. Sweet words came from his mouth: "Ma...Ma...Ma."

Though the child was almost two years old, he still could not walk, and his speech was not clear because of malnutrition. He was like his father, she told herself, the silent type.

She heard someone calling out her name—and in that voice there was joy. She rushed to meet her neighbor who was carrying something. Laila's heart beat faster, and her throat became dry. Her mind produced thoughts faster than she could make sense of them.

"The caravan leader had a letter..."

She could not hear the rest. She quickly put on her dress and headdress, grabbed her child and ran out the door, leaving the cow near the house.

Her heart thumped so loudly she thought the other women could probably hear it. Her shyness prevented her from talking.

The caravan leader looked at her, the shadow of a smile on his wizened old face. As he took the letter from his sack, she recognized it by its sweat-stained color.

"Your husband is in good health and he salutes you and his son. He sent you money for house expenses, the livestock, and taxes. He works very hard in America."

He counted out her Maria Teresa riyals. Timidly, she asked, "Didn't he say when he'll be back?"

The old man shook his head and said, "No, he didn't say."

A vein in her heart seemed to rupture, and years she had not really lived grew on her face. Her child looked surprised, as his ears heard the beating of her heart and his hands felt the heat coming from the distraught body. Laila saw a pile of riyals in front of her.

"This is one hundred riyals."

Oh, what would she do with the money? One hundred riyals was a huge amount, but still it was just enough for household expenses for several months. Famine might show up as it did last year and swallow the money and the grains, as well as their souls.

The tax department of the imam had a share in this hundred, perhaps a larger share than her own. The sheik and the headman of the village also had a share.

The caravan leader went to another room. Perhaps he would be back with new dresses.

She turned to see more women than she could count staring at her. The women's faces were dusty and fearfully sad; they were waiting like her for a word, news, dresses... But their husbands had not sent a thing.

The money wasn't going to be enough for her. The state wanted everything. And the rain didn't bring a thing.

One old woman shook her head, "I guess my son's run into more problems than the others. May God save him and provide for him. Usually he was all right, he sent something, at least once a year. But the others are lost; they no longer send even letters. God knows where they are buried."

Laila wasn't listening. She had many problems on her mind. But she would buy meat and chicken tomorrow, so she and her little boy could have a good meal.

For more than three months she hadn't seen the color of meat nor tasted it.

The caravan leader came back carrying in his hands the rest of the things her husband had sent.

"This is a care package from Modhesh: sugar, rice, headdress, dress and clothes and soap. How lucky you are with such expensive gifts."

She hadn't known soap for a year, not tasted rice, for the war had made things scarce.

The child couldn't believe that his mother had brought all these things home. But, her joy wasn't complete, for what she really wanted was his return. She stayed up all night praying for him to have good health and to return safely.

Laila kissed the letter that had come from Modhesh. She told her son that one day he would be able to read the letter himself when he went to Quran school.

Years passed, followed by more years; the letter became tattered from so many kisses and tears...

The Land, Salma

When the clouds began to gather in the sky, Salma ran to open the irrigation canals to water the fields near the house. By the time she came back, the sky had already opened its gates, and rain poured down, feeding the thirsty earth.

Everyone in the house was asleep, and Salma found herself alone in her room. She stretched out on the bed, turning her face toward the open window overlooking the fields. Rainwater was gushing from the canals onto the parched land. But Salma's imagination led her away from the land and the rain toward other things.

She heard a voice whisper: "Salma, finally, you're facing yourself. You must admit the truth; don't try to run away from yourself, for that won't help you. Admit it, you've been waiting for him a long time and you can't bear it any longer. Try to remember how long your husband Dirham has been away. Five years, exactly. Oh, Salma, five years and you're starting the sixth year of waiting. How old are you? Count, you don't need to rush. You're twenty-six years old. Yes, you've started to feel that you're getting old—quickly, without noticing and without enjoying life. Do I have to remind you, Salma, that you were married ten years ago? Yes, your husband went away after leaving a seed inside your womb. He didn't even know. You didn't tell him, as that was the custom of the village. You thought he wouldn't be gone for long."

But he had been gone longer than all the previous times.

"Slow down, Salma. Let's not race ahead of events. Let's begin at the beginning, when you were born. I mean, from when you were married. Am I right?"

"Yes, it's clear from your face. You were young then, only sixteen years old, living in your father's house. One day you heard whispering and saw everyone looking at you. You sensed what was going on around you and

were happy as every young girl should be happy at the prospect of her wedding. You kept your joy hidden from people so they wouldn't talk about you behind your back.

"But you showed me, I know everything. You were happy to get married to Dirham. When your aunt came, covered your face with a veil, and announced, 'Now your marriage to Dirham is confirmed,' you put up a struggle and called everybody around you names; but deep inside, you were happy. Tears rolled down your cheeks—tears of joy. People thought you were weeping out of sadness for leaving your father and his house.

"When your husband's family arrived to take you to your new home, you walked quickly to get there as soon as possible. People noticed that and you were embarrassed for fear others would discover how eager you were to get to your new home.

"But Salma, did you really love Dirham? No, I don't think you did. Then what was the secret of that happiness of yours? Was it because you were a young girl or that you thought you would be freed from your father's house? From the hard work you did there? Did you think you would find peace and comfort at your husband's house?

"Let's look, Salma, at your new life under your husband's roof. After the first seven days—the wedding days—you began your duty as a wife, to serve her husband and his family.

"You woke up every day before the dawn prayer, milked and fed the cow, then went to the well. After filling your water jar, you came home to fix your husband's breakfast. At noon, you went to the fields to work with your father-in-law, plowing, sowing and clearing, only to return home exhausted to fix lunch: you ground the grain, kneaded the dough, and baked the bread to feed your husband.

"After lunch he left to chew qat. You rarely had lunch, which was usually your breakfast, too: bits of bread with bits of coffee beans or a pudding with milk.

"Then it was after-the-lunch work: washing clothes, going to the mountain to collect firewood, going to the well again at sunset to get the evening water and then cutting grass for the cow. You fixed dinner and offered it to your husband who came home after praying at the mosque. How many

times did you forget to pray? You lay down near midnight dead tired and woke up at the dawn prayer call to work again—till you were exhausted.

"This has been your life, every day. Has there been anything new in the last ten years?

"It's the same life you used to live at your father's house. Nothing has changed except your boss—first your father, then your husband. You and Dirham did live together for a while before he left to work in the city. Remember, you encouraged him to leave because you wanted new silk dresses and other presents that husbands usually brought back to their wives after being away.

"Your husband didn't disappoint you; he came back after two years and brought everything you dreamed of. But, your life didn't change whether he was at home or away. In both cases you worked for his family and for the land. Salma, your husband went back to the city, for two years, and then came back again to leave your first baby in your womb. You waited for his return to you and to his child. A year passed. And another. And five years, but still he hasn't appeared. He's still alive overseas, over there. Across the big sea, the one they say has no end.

"How do you know, Salma, whether he's alone or not? Don't tremble and turn pale. It's merely a thought, a guess. He might be alone, and he might not. No one trusts men, especially when they're far away, unseen by familiar eyes. Why should your husband be any different? You know the story of your uncle, Zaid, who deserted his wife for twenty years. He's alive and has another wife and children. They say one day he will return to his first wife, who still waits for him.

"Why won't your husband do the same? Yes, why wouldn't he cheat on you? He's a human being and a man. Men are always weak, as they claim. I say this not to upset you and not to bother you with doubts, but merely as a possibility. The truth is unknown; it's there overseas with your husband.

"Don't think about acting like him, cheating on him. You couldn't, because here in the village people hear every whisper. Haven't you noticed that for the past two days everyone has been following you with their eyes filled with doubt? Haven't you noticed? Why are they throwing those si-

lent looks your way? You're smart, Salma. You know. You're wearing make-up. Yes, make-up. They haven't seen you wear make-up since your husband left five years ago. Don't try to argue that you feel you're getting old and are trying to look young. That's unlikely.

"The truth, Salma, is that you're wearing make-up for him, for Hassan. No, no—don't let your heart flutter. Don't get embarrassed and blush—you'll reveal your secret. See how much you love him?"

"There is nothing wrong with loving someone, but it is shameful to betray another. You betray your husband when you love someone else. Yes, it's a very dangerous matter. A woman in your position here doesn't have the right to love whom she wants, nor to enjoy her youth. She is merely a servant. The man marries her to serve his parents. He leaves her to go far away and not come back. She doesn't have the right to seek divorce. Divorce is disdained. Don't put your hand over your breast as though you don't like the thought. Divorce is something you'd like since you would enjoy the life that your husband has stolen. But you couldn't get a divorce. Especially since your father's death there would be no one to support you. Now, you're only a servant of your husband's family, of your husband's father, of your husband's son, and of his land.

"You won't gain a thing by loving Hassan. He's a nice young man, every young woman wants him, but you aren't a young girl. You're a woman with a husband and a child. Are you thinking of those childhood days when you used to play with him in the mountains, and he would take you as his mate when you played the game of husband and wife? Those days are gone. You're old today—five years of waiting have been tough. But, Salma, what can you do?"

"Do you ask for divorce? If you do that, where will your child go? And who will marry you?"

"You well know that many women live without husbands after they divorce. The young men of the village seek out only the young girls.

"Think about your land, Salma. Yes, it's your land, this land that you give your life for, your youth, your blood. Your land where you've poured your sweat for years. How could you leave your land and for whom?"

"You're thinking, Salma. This is good. Nobody values the land like you do. Your husband won't care for the land and neither will your son when he grows up. He'll leave it like his father did. He'll go away like others have.

"Your land, Salma, you've worked for it, shed blood for it. From this land you eat all year long; your son eats and grows because of the land. Even your husband, when he returns, will eat from it. And you...it's you who keeps producing the good things from this land, the grain, the fodder, the milk and the ghee. Everything in this village comes from the land. Isn't the land your life? The life your son will know when he is older and understands the effort you've put into it?"

"As for Hassan, he's exactly like your husband. He won't live in the village forever. He'll depart tomorrow, leaving behind a woman to serve his parents, to work the land. Even if you were that woman—what's the difference between your present life and life in his house? There is no difference, Salma, no difference."



The voice faded. Salma looked around her, surprised. The rain was falling softly on the land, like the music in dreams. The streams on the mountain's terraces embraced the dry, yellow roots, giving them life.

Her small son opened the door to her bedroom, came in, and threw himself into her arms. Salma fiercely thought, *I'll teach him. I'll teach him to love the land.*

The rainwater seeped slowly into the earth.

The Color of Rain

Are you afraid?"

"No, I'm shivering...maybe it's from the cold...or..." He was silent for a moment and started to stare at the horizon before him. His gaze returned after taking in the black mountain peaks, those mountains that surrounded the deep valley asleep in its mythical silence. It was like his father's brooding silence, before the revolution in Yemen had brought him to this distant peak that echoed with distant gunfire.

"Are you hungry?" the other man said.

"Maybe. I haven't eaten a real meal for days."

"What about some bread?"

"I'm tired of bread."

"You fool! Don't you know how good it tastes? I'm fed up with what you call a real meal. In twenty years I have eaten everything, from snakes in China to frog soup in France..."

"Are you going to tell me all that all over again?" the young man asked.

"But why not?" That way the night will pass more quickly and we won't be bored or afraid."

"Or hungry?"

"Perhaps."

Shots from afar were heard and echoed in the valley; the young man trembled.

"Did I tell you that you're afraid?"

"Please, I just feel cold."

"Look, don't you feel that there's something new going on this evening?"

"What is it?" he asked scared.

"It rained this morning."

"So?"

"Don't you feel that the rain's color cleaned everything, even the moon?" the older man said, pointing to the moon.

"Hey! Trust me, it's better if you leave your hand on the trigger..."

"Oh! Don't you see how wonderful everything is? Have you ever imagined seeing such a beautiful scene?... The moon is sending its light like the rain shower that fell this morning. Even the stars, they look like the beginning of raindrops from clouds. Rain has a color; you can't feel it, but you can see it when you want to see those creatures that fall into it. When I was a sailor, I never thought about the moon or the rain. They would have only made me long for the village. You don't know the meaning of the sea, to spend years on it, the sun barbecues you, and the night swallows you into its silence. I was ready to give my life for a scene like this. Don't you see the mountain peaks in front of us? They're very vivid in all their details. Look over there; I would trade my life for such beauty. Oh, God, I thought that joining the army was just an adventure, that I'd carry weapons and sing songs of the revolution, like the ones I used to hear in French ports about the revolution, Napoleon, 'the Marseillaise.' But did the French ever see anything wonderful like this? The moon reveals everything for you, yes, everything..."

Then he fired his gun, the mountain echoed, and the body by his side trembled.

"What's wrong with you? Are you crazy?" he asked.

"No, no. It's just that the moon's so wonderful. It's lower on the horizon; can't you see that? So I worship the moon, the soft light. It doesn't give you the full picture, the shadows are enough. Don't tremble, my friend. You're just not used to the cold, being from Aden. There the sun is shining all the time, but sometimes it is a bother. You've never seen an iceberg. I've seen, in my twenty years as a sailor, all the seas and heard all the stories. But, that I would be a soldier in the revolution, that is the last story I imagined would happen, but it did."

The young man said, "Listen, friend, I've heard you say this for the twentieth time. But for the first time, you've proved to be a good sniper. You hit something down there. It might be suffering in pain, or maybe it died, I can't tell. I didn't see it move after it fell down." He was silent for a

moment and then went on, "But you're repeating all of that again. The moon is the moon, the same one that we see every night with the stars and the rains. There is nothing there except the fact that I sank in mud trying to catch that damn rabbit that showed up this afternoon. I was imagining a delicious meal of grilled rabbit, but got nothing except stale bread!"



A cold wind blew, howling as it passed the gap. The mountain echoed the shout of a man. Nobody answered it, the echo died, and the man fell to the bottom and crashed against the rocks in the deep valley.

"Listen, listen, do you feel something?" the young man asked.

It was a scary sound; he pulled the gun near him.

"Don't be afraid, it's the sound of roaring water, it's the flood coming from the north. The clouds covered that whole area this morning. Here come those waters, violently, after all that rainfall, don't you feel its great presence? It's like the roar of soldiers creeping towards the target, fearlessly. They tear silence and cowardliness to shreds. They forget everything, even their existence. They plunge forward, everyone encouraged by the others at his side. If a soldier were alone he might have run away, but they are a crowd, you know, they're more than one person. Don't you hear them crashing against the mountains? Even the falling trees don't bother them. They're compelled. Everyone is encouraging the other, fearlessly, defiantly."

The flood reached the valley. They were lying at the mountain's peak. Water rushed strongly, carrying with it everything that was in its way, though they didn't notice. Water rose and fell violently. The sound of its crashing reached higher and higher; they thought it would swallow them. Then they were embraced in a deep silence and water passed beneath them, slithering away like a mythical snake suddenly leaving the depths of the mountain after having been imprisoned for centuries. It started to crush everything.

"We're like that water. We don't know what is being swallowed in front of us, but we just keep going. Because we're together, we're not afraid. We don't care, then we crash. It's just the beginning, and beginnings are always violent. Everything is permitted and legal. And as long as, in the end, we

water the fields and give the desert a great green carpet of happiness, our rush will not continue for long. We will calm down after a while, but we will give the soil a different color! A different life.”

Silence continued, the moon was kind, the flood passed away.



“But what about her? Did you write anything?”

The young man said, “I tore up everything. How would I send my letters? Aden is far away now. How stupid I was. I said, I’ll write her all the time. Perhaps she thinks I’m a hero now and waits for me to tell her stories about my adventures. She wouldn’t believe that I tremble when I hear gunfire, as if the bullet had entered deep inside me. You’re older than me, you’ve seen many vast horizons. Perhaps you’re making fun of me now... But I...”

He laughed sadly and went on.

“I’m just a kid. I only know math and writing and talking about patriotism. The biggest thing in my life is the fact that I’m here. I made this decision without thinking. If I had thought for just a moment, I wouldn’t be here—it’s just the excitement of it all. I talked about patriotism until people couldn’t bear to hear anymore...now and here is the revolution. How far away from it am I? Everyone said ‘Volunteer, volunteer,’ and so I volunteered. I’d only been married a few months. I didn’t think of my bride. Her father told me, ‘Don’t worry, I’ll be here.’ My friends said, ‘We’ll be here.’ And here I am. She would be ashamed of me, if I told her what war is and what fear is. I say to myself, I’m afraid for her sake, but I’m a liar. I taste my desire for life at each and every shot.”

Another shot sounded. He trembled, and his throat was dry.

The sailor said, “I hope he was hit. They’re so wicked. They know that the moonlight uncovers the peaks, and then they can climb the rocks and search for openings. But he fell down. Is something wrong?”

“No, no. I’m scared to death.”

“Don’t say that. Keep on talking as if nothing happened.”

“You’re a different kind of person from me. You fought today and before today, probably more than once.”

The sailor laughed, “On many a side and without any reason. But today, I’m fighting for something. Perhaps I fought before with the Italians and after that I fought with the English, and then I was an arms smuggler. But I didn’t feel anything. Then, neither the mountains nor the stars nor even the color of rain, nothing in the world excited me. I used to dream about this, this cold air, these naked peaks. Those stupid infiltrators, hunters of gold, and arms, and stupidity! Those dreamers of the revolution and the holiday commemorating it. I dreamt of all of them. I didn’t know that under this rain, my country’s rain, I’d be a hunter. Yes, my son, I knew streets in ports all over the world. I slept on their pavement. I was a beggar in the narrow streets of Marseilles. I was hungry. I worked days and nights. I worked in coal mines, near the flames of ovens and under an icy cold sky. I knew what it means to fight a war that is not your war. It’s difficult to see hungry faces and now, don’t you want me to shout happily here, ‘I’m so happy, I’m so happy!’ I’ll tell this to all the people everywhere. Oh. How ashamed I was to tell them where I’m from, but now, I won’t be ashamed at all, but I’ll tell them your story. The son of Aden, who sits nearly naked and hungry on the peak of mountains, in a cold whose taste he doesn’t know, eating only dry bread, and dreaming of grilled rabbit, writing imaginary letters to an imaginary woman.”

“I’m not lying.”

“I didn’t say you were. Everything here is real, to the degree that reality isn’t believable anymore!”

Their eyes searched for something in front of them, something other than silence or the color of rain, something that felt like feet creeping, like a sharp arrow planting death. The valley under them looked far away, it had lost its imaginary strength. It calmly led southward. Nobody knows where that valley starts or ends. Even if they knew it wouldn’t matter, what’s important is that it provides. The creeping sound got closer, closer, and the color of the moon became more yellow.

The sailor said, “Something happened in a port. I was a young man with some green and red banknotes in my hands; inside me masculine impulses were erupting; I hadn’t yet sold my strength to anybody. I worked honorably, by sweat and hard work. I was happy that I’d left Yemen behind

me to see a new world full of lights and noise and people. The least of these I thought were angels. On that night, in that port, I lost my virginity in the arms of the first woman I met. She had a baby, I gave her generously all my money. I took from her more than my manhood. She told me lots of things, but I didn't understand anything. I had a fever. I'd spent six months on board the ship. Do you know the meaning of that kind of loneliness? I didn't know until then, but I found it in the bed of that woman on that night, when I discovered her kisses were false. I didn't realize that until I returned to sea, when I reflected on my memories. I knew then that I was stupid, but I didn't forget that port. I sent letter after letter to her, even though I had forgotten her name; all I remembered was the name of the port, and that was enough for me to love her. I've returned many times, but she wasn't there. I returned to her after three years. That was the only thing I called love. I knew that she cheated me; she took everything, everything, but left me the sourness of loneliness. She planted this sourness, yes, she planted it. Oh, friend, you own a home, have love and friends, but me? I've returned to Yemen after twenty years. I've been changed somewhat. I tried to go back to the sea, that big friend that I've not missed, the one who's always ready to embrace me at any moment. And now you see me here and then there. It's just chance, isn't it? A chance, or the luck that I've always wanted. I've sold myself for more than an army, a company. I've learned how to work in a ship and learned how to hold a gun and kill people I don't know, with whom I have no personal argument. But today, it's a different matter; I know for the first time why I'm here, why I hold this gun in my hand. I may not know who I am killing, but I know why I kill. Do you hear me? After twenty years, for the first time, I know something. The picture of graveyards is still in front of me. I returned carrying gifts and money, but I found only tombstones before my eyes. Here, I'm also carving new tombstones, perhaps I'll make one for myself."

The other voice interrupted him suddenly, and said, "Please don't say that..."

"Morning is getting close, we'll stay here together."

"Yes, we will, we're the only ones left."

"Nobody knows, perhaps there are others who, like us, could've made their way to these rocks."

"Maybe."

From far away a light appeared, but the moon had not yet disappeared. In the distance before the two men, the horizon connected with the earth. There was a delightful smell.

"Look, it's the rain, don't you see its color? I can't describe it, but I feel it in a strange way, so much I can almost describe it..."

"I can feel its smell, a fragrance I used to sell in a store I worked in..."

The creeping sound got closer, the ground announced it. Light covered both of them, voices rose and there were several shots, fire, light, dust around them. The valley echoed with the sounds...

"Don't be afraid, we'll stay together."

"And you'll tell this story on the ship."

"Yes, I'll tell them about the color of rain in my home country."

"I'll tell them in Aden, what cold tastes like."

The mountain rang with the noise of moving water roaring into the valley, gunfire was all around them, and the sounds—of shots and the rushing water—echoed and re-echoed through the mountain passes.

The Saturday Market

When the car broke down at the end of Sumaytah valley, we had to walk the rest of the way to the Saturday Market.

I loved the walk, especially when we crossed a stream with cool running water. A gentle breeze blew, and before us stood the lofty and rocky Hujariyyah mountains, embracing villages, and green land rich with growing wheat.

Sumaytah valley is beautiful in the evening when quiet comes, when the sun has sunk away gathering its bloody rays behind it, and the sound of water sings a sad Yemeni song.

But I'm angry now, because the weather is hot, the sun strong, and the water tasteless. The faces of fellow travelers are tired and yellowish. Tomorrow is the *Eid* (feast), and we have to reach our villages tonight. Ever since yesterday, when we left Aden, each of us has been dreaming of a festive evening party with our wives and children.

But the cursed car broke down.

After we spent four hours waiting near the car that refused to start, we could no longer avoid the walk. We were hungry, our stomachs churned violently, encouraging us to keep moving, especially when one of us reminded the other that it was Saturday, the day the market is filled with all sorts of things.

I put a head cover on to protect my head from the sun. I raised my sarong to my knees and splashed strongly through the water while looking at the mountains and trees, listening to the lowing of cows tromping about nearby in the valley and a skinny dog barking. I looked in the eyes of the farmers who lazily followed our pedestrian caravan.

The market was not far away.

As we were leaving the valley and had walked for a while, we noticed a green meadow and some huts made of wood and dry straw, under which sat the sellers. Even from the distance, you could hear their voices and the

voices of buyers. Falcons soared high, going round and round over the slaughterhouse at the other end of the market. Donkeys brayed, sending mating calls to each other. Then a rotten smell filled the air as children shouted and threw scraps of rotten fruit at each other.

As I reached the market, I dropped into the nearest seat in the café and started to guzzle down hot coffee. The market was big. Nearby was a hill with a British flag raised, a white building, a camp, and an armed guard in his police uniform.

Saturday Market is the border point between North and South Yemen. At the bottom of the hill an infinitely green valley extends, which is crossed by Sumaytah valley that descends from the Hajariyyah mountains. When it rains, the gushing water flowing from the north carries mud, trees, and cars that chose the heart of the valley for a road; it carries people as well and whatever else stands in its way. The silent valley does not salute anyone. It is silent like death when it embraces its victims. Oh! How much life has been snuffed out silently by the valley.

The hill still remembered, until only recently, the English bullets harvesting revolutionaries from the Subayha tribe. The avenging bullets are fired silently every evening. Oh, you valley of Sumaytah, when will you be silent?

Each of my friends went his own way once we reached the market. I relaxed under the roofed café, looking around me. There was a noisy mill in front of me. Nearby was the donkeys' pen. Those donkeys carried the grain to the mill; they were not headed for the slaughterhouse and its horrid stench, the smell of blood and other filth that spattered onto the slaughterhouse floor. Flies buzzed and falcons descended from their heights to attack the fleshy scraps scattered all over the slaughterhouse. Women, in their clothes as black as their faces, were selling fruit and vegetables. Their voices could be heard above with their muffled coughs. The market was filled with the sounds of buyers and sellers, the screeches of falcons, and the buzz of flies pestering people's eyes and mouths at every turn.

I was thinking about my wife, whom I would see in a couple of hours, and my son, who was born while I was abroad, and about all of the little things I dreamed of under that roofed passage, while the hot noon sun

poured down on our heads. How badly I wanted to be at home with my wife at this very moment.

Tomorrow was the feast. The market with its noises was disturbing me. So, too, were the shouts and sounds of animals, and the braying of male donkeys as they tried to get the attention of female donkeys in front of the mill; ropes around their necks tying them to the wall prevented them from doing what they liked. The battle between the donkeys and the ropes was great.

The sun was beating down strongly, and flies attacked our eyes constantly. A woman near me was scrutinizing her surroundings. She was a young, tanned, thin woman in a black dress. Her face showed signs of poverty suffered during her youth. As she followed what was going on around her, she groaned in despair whenever the donkeys were prevented from doing what they desired. I looked hard at her, all the while the mill producing an unbearable noise. What was she thinking? And what was I doing here? It seemed we both thought of one thing: of the battle that was not yet over for the donkeys. They were struggling, even if they could not move from the spot where they were tied. It was their fate to be tied up with ropes. They knew what they wanted, but could not get it, as long as the ropes held them back. Their eyes were absent in a daze.

The noonday sun was burning the ground, cars droned through the market on their way to the military camps, their passengers, red-faced soldiers, were sweating profusely. The woman waited. My nerves were about to snap. I was thinking about my life, the life of the market, the woman, the donkeys, and the battle that the woman finally ended by suddenly untying their ropes. Then she sat at a distance to watch, as we exchanged a knowing look.

And those in the market, what were they thinking about?

Suddenly, the horn sounded in the military camp. But, the woman still sat in the shadow of the mill, breathless...



I dreamed about how comfortable my room would be tonight. From the middle of the market, the sound of a flute rose, accompanied by a drum and a Tuhami song and a dance by a young brunette, her hair the

color of mud from the valley floor on a flood day. Her black glittering eyes winked, and the movements of her exciting sexy body and her half-opened mouth and her tongue as it darted over her full lips made me withdraw in a whirl of need.

The donkeys, the woman out of breath, and I were all possessed by dread. There was a young woman in her thirties with shining eyes and another young woman in her twenties dancing with a call in her black eyes, her lips a sin, and her body a hell of lust. I had to run away to escape.

I walked away from the roofed cafe and walked round and round in the market like a madman, colliding on my way with skinny, blue-faced children with bare feet, and women with oil dripping from their hair over their faces under the strong sun. The oil contorted their already-ugly faces.

A smelly man grabbed me by the hand, begging me to buy something from his store. A child with tears in his eyes ran behind me extending his hand towards me, his lips mouthing a painful request. A servant carried a half-sleeping and half-dead child. His face shouted of pain and sickness.

Even the animals on sale in the market were sick. I was mechanically chewing some qat and smoking. I was searching for a way to get to my own village before sunset. When I returned to the roofed passageway, the woman had left, carrying a big jute sack on her head, the noon sun frying her naked feet. Sumaytah valley was burning the green meadow not far away from the rocky Hujariyyah mountains that embraced all the houses, the countryside, and the hordes of people carrying bundles on their backs.

Abu Rupee

A few raindrops were dripping in front of the store as I stood shivering from the cold. But the rain didn't bother me; what worried me was—why was he late? On the wall near the store, I noticed a drawing he had done yesterday. The drawing smiled. Abu Rupee was such a nice guy.

I sat down on the stairs of the store and thought about Abu Rupee.

Three years ago, while I was sitting in the small plaza in front of our store, he came walking slowly by, looking at the ground, kicking stones with his foot. You could tell somehow he was deep in thought. When he looked up and saw me, he smiled. "May I sit down?" he asked.

I laughingly looked at him and said, "Why not, it's God's plaza after all!"

He shook his head, astonished, looking at the plaza and me.

"Is there anything left in this world that belongs to God? I'm amazed to hear you say that. People have taken everything that belongs to God. This plaza belongs to the government, and you represent the government."

I laughed. How could I, a kid still in elementary school, represent the government? What a funny idea!

"Have a seat, Abu Rupee."

"How do you know my name?"

"Is there anyone in Addis Ababa who doesn't know your name?"

He sat by me and began drawing lines on the ground with his small cane. They looked strange at first, but soon became a funny picture.

He took a deep breath as he looked at what he drew. "Listen, what's your name?"

"Sa'id."

"Do you study at the community school?"

"Yes, I'm in the fifth grade," I said proudly.