

An Arabian Mosaic

I threw the bracelets under the big bulldozer. After that, I was brought here . . .

Last Fragment

The maid said to me: "They wrote about you in the newspapers."

"Why?" I asked.

"The director had sent candy to the children in your village."

"Were the children happy?"

"Yes," she said. "They sent a telegram of thanks to the director."

*Pharaoh Is Drowning
Again*

SAKINA FUAD

THE SEA. I TRAVEL ABOVE YOU TO THE END OF THE world. I came from you as a drop, as a tear from your eye. Why was crying created from tears? So that I would fall as a tear? A tear on a night of love, or a night of misery, or a night of revenge. Any night. A man and a woman and a tear. And a creature dying and living, carrying the sin of one night. Life in its entirety is the sin of one night. Damned are the nights which produce human beings. They drink in the nights infused with anxiety. Misery flows in the marrow of their bones. The shock occurs every moment. The electric touch of pain is embedded in the folds of the brain. Creatures afflicted by madness, anger, agony, and frustration, and ground down by the crush, the chase, and the fleeing.

From where? And to where? And when will the drop return to the sea? I don't know.

The voice of the singer Abd al-Wahab cries in the distance, carrying all the sorrows of the night.

The sea . . .

Moses struck the water with his stick. The water receded, and a way was opened up beneath the feet of those fleeing.

I was one of them. I hid myself in the exodus of the wretched and covered myself with their nights in order to flee. I was lost in their perdition. We descended into the bottom of the parted sea, crawled, and fled. The waves protected us. The waves were like mountains on either side of us. It was a moment in which the whole world became still. The sea held its breath. Had it breathed, the mountains of its waves would have tumbled down on those in flight. The sea held its breath and clutched its waves to its heart. We crossed to the other bank. We flung ourselves onto the ground to catch our breath, to nurse the wounds, and to still the pain with the sweetness of salvation.

The sense of terror . . .

The sight of Pharaoh standing on the other bank with his armies of men and chariots, his arrows sharpened and poisoned . . .

The flight . . .

But where to? There is no escape. Pharaoh is our fate. He is always behind us.

Then who is the way for?

“Whoever wants to escape will find a way.”

There’s no end to my good mother’s proverbs. Life consists of pleasing proverbs on my mother’s tongue, and other women’s tongues.

My mother is a person from the generation of proverbs. Her words, which have no meaning, are killing me. When they reach my ears, I feel as if they chop off my head and blow out my brains. I raise a hue and cry in her face, and in my face, and in the face of the whole world.

I run away . . .

“Taxi!”

“Where to? . . . What’s the address?”

“Take me as close as you can to the sea.”

The taxi takes off at full speed. My mind races ahead of the speeding car to the water. My innermost feelings are a sea raging and beating against the shores of my body. I head off from wherever I may be sitting, and sail away. The horizon has no limits. The world has no end. I came to the world at the moment of beginning. Everything was water, and I was a drop, swirling with the current, gliding on the surface of the universe. The earth and the sky were still joined together. I was at their meeting point. I disengaged myself. I climbed up to the sky and down to the earth. I chose the sea, so that the journey and the horizon would remain my limitless world. I could climb to the sky and flow on the surface of the earth. There were no limits and no fetters, no bridges and no walls. We were all drops, swimming and swimming. When did the journey of misery begin?

The drop was covered with white foam. The foam became a beautiful woman. Her first name was Aphrodite. The name changed and the form changed too, but she remained a woman. The body is only the first prison cell. After this prison, there are millions of others.

“Whereabouts?” The driver asks again.

And I’m still traveling alone, competing with the speeding car, searching for a time where cares and sorrows have vanished; looking for a place that doesn’t possess me, nor I it; a place that I come to as a guest and leave without grief, without being known, and without knowing it.

The silence takes me back from the sea to the earth. The silence means we’ve come to a stop.

“Whereabouts?”

“This is the place.”

I look closely at the number, at the building, at the faces. Everything is as it used to be. I stare at the driver. How did he know my address and bring me to my door?

I ask him.

He assures me I gave him the address when I flung myself on the car seat. I don't argue.

A lot of things have come to an end, including the age of arguing. We've entered the age of silence. Everything is done by force of habit. All actions take place without the intervention of our will. We eat. We drink. We sleep. Children are born. We kill, and hate, and love. Even love. What was the meaning of this word in your time, you, the old people? Words are few. We can no longer bear the additional burden of the word. Machines operate and think and plan. The radio is the only machine that sometimes speaks. There are modern devices that pick up vibrations from space. Our engineers work away, and receivers break through new barriers every day. Voices are received from space, and we hear all those who have left us. I have no longing for anyone. I've often asked about the meaning of this word. They say longing is a cold that bites at the depths of the heart. Longing is a mad craving for something. These words belong to the age of words: my heart is nothing but a pump drawing blood.

This morning is different from any other morning . . .

Why?

In a vibrating, staccato voice, the radio broadcaster announces:

“Our instruments have managed to pick up signals—

muttering and whispering—from the uppermost reaches of space. Reception is still poor, but the voices have confirmed that they are from our planet, from earth. Everything is still very vague. We are trying to overcome engineering problems, but the few words that have reached us are ones of greeting to you.”

For the first time ever, longing is born in me. My blood's pump trembles; the monotonous routine to which it has worked, year in, year out, breaks down.

The cold that bites at the depths of the heart . . .

I yearn for something . . .

My yearnings are submerged in a feeling of alienation. I don't know what he wants, or what I want. I listen to the program. Instruments have been used that are more sensitive than any known before. No penetration of space has ever reached these voices before. This is the first time *they* have said that *they* leave us simply to dissolve in space as souls, and then observe us. I throw myself to the floor at the foot of this sophisticated piece of equipment. My ears vie with the instruments in trying to reach out into space. I search for something.

These mutterings and buzzings and silences and tears are all his. I heard his tears and silence and coughing as he met the morning with his old, bare chest. He died far away from us. They said it happened in obscure circumstances. His pointed words killed him. In an age when only sickly words are spoken, he was surrounded by sugar-coated words. But he was not one of those who spoke them.

I've never seen him. I know him as if he breathes in my soul, and I wear his face, with all its sharp features.

My mother tells me I was born a few days after they

took him away. But I know him. His image appears to me often. I meet him on all my journeys. There is no shore I visit without seeing him there as well. His roaring laughter is soundless. He beats his broad chest and waves his fist. One day the time for our meeting will come. And today I hear him. My heart is heavy with longing. Its fuse can explode at a touch. The sand from every shore of every sea in the whole wide world will no longer be enough to extinguish the fire.

“Where to?”

To whom is my question addressed? I can't find the taxi driver. When did I get out of the taxi? How long does it take to climb these twenty floors with their five hundred stairs? I don't count them with time or numbers, but with the words that are gnawing at my heart and that I'm chewing over. I finally reach the last floor. People, houses, cars are like little toys fulfilling the daily routine. At the end of the day the puppets are turned over, their faces down. The game at night is called sleep. At dawn, the key is stealthily turned, and the machines are wound up and begin to gyrate. I've released my daily scream. Who will release me from my key? Who will break the prison cells? Who will make me a human being again?

My heart pumps longing. The face of my father, whom I've never seen, accompanies me. I wait for his voice in the coming vibrations. I thirst for it. I touch all the seas of the world and they turn into crystals.

I want a drop of water.

My apartment is on the first floor. I won't go back there. I've taken the decision for the thousandth time. I climb up and down the five hundred stairs every day, struggling with the decision and fleeing from my chained

will. The turning of the key in the elegant door puts an end to everything. There it is: the air-conditioned apartment, the colorful walls, the soft white bed on which dreams roam and stretch and yawn. The plushness and lushness of the bedroom are enticing. My husband conducts his important conversations on a number of colorful phones. Everything is soft, alluring, and entwined in fine spiderwebs. The expensive pictures are imported from Paris. He draws his money from an enchanted well. His hobby is to collect the rare—in art, in love, in food.

He laughs ironically. What is left of my breath, after the exertion of climbing the stairs, fails at the sight of the triumphant expression on his face. My dead resolution finds its resting place in his eyes. I've become part of the picture. The comfort and softness possess me. The silence, the stillness, the smoothness drag me to the bottom of the earth. I sink under its layers. The spiderwebs wrap my feet together, twisting my steps round themselves. I turn round and spin between the rooms. The tombstones of furniture rise higher every day. I recite the verses of the Fatiha.¹ The reciting voice rings out in the silence. The walls close in. They move, advance, press together. They turn my body into a flat, dry surface, a leaf preserved for millions of years between the pages of a book made of brick, concrete, and iron. My heart pumps longing. I rewind the recorded program. I listen. My ears reach out into space searching for him, for his roar, for the blow he struck into the air in order to crush them, for the spit he spat at them when they

¹ The first chapter of the Koran, which is recited, among other occasions, at funerals or when remembering the dead or on visiting a grave.

took him away. He spoke his words at the right time. Words that are not spoken at the right place and time are decaying bodies.

My body leaves the bed, emptying what is inside it. My husband makes love to me skillfully, as skillfully as he handles everything else I don't know about.

The cup of tea, the rocking chair which is moving monotonously, the long bathrobe and the bed are all still warm. I tremble and watch his briefcase. The briefcase walks away, carried by his hand. It disappears. I, and the other things in the picture, go into a state of waiting.

I tidy everything up again, but without deviating one step from the framework of the picture. The tombstones of furniture rise higher every day. I move round them, reciting the verses of the Fatiha. I lift the silk covers. There is not a scratch on the furniture. The covers are lifted only to be patted gently and to have the dust brushed off them. His hobby is to visit auctions and bring back the rarest things. He visited our house and handed his money over, and I was added to his purchases and the collection of rare things. My features have become the same as theirs. Words have lost their value. Silence is no longer a condition around us: silence is a living creature inhabiting our depths and smothering every ember there. Everything is done by force of habit or through fear of him. Pharaoh runs his kingdom with great skill; the maids are sent to the market and the wives are kept behind closed doors. Pharaoh is a lord who rules by divine right. The queen ascends a throne of fog; a puff of air from the master's mouth blows the throne away and he seats another woman on his right or on his left. Kingship has corrupted everything. Sincerity has

died out and the warmth of things has faded away. Pharaoh does not speak. Pharaoh has become one of the machines of our time, operating, pushing buttons, managing.

This morning is different from any other morning . . .
Why?

Penetration into outer space brings back all those who have left us. Penetration into the layer where souls live is happening for the first time. I've recorded the program. I play the recording again at the lowest speed, searching for him among them. Everything strong belongs to him, the laughter, the roaring, the stupefying silence.

He says his words here. I long for him. I long for the word. I long for a place that doesn't possess me nor I it. I move. I dart along, without limitations, without chains. I dwell on the surface of the whole world, taking and giving. I turn into a drop of water. I flow into the big sea.

The sea . . .

Pharaoh is standing on the other bank. His scream reverberates. I must go home, or else he will come down to fetch me.

Pharaoh goes down to the bottom of the parted sea.

The wounds dry out. The pains subside. I stand upright on the shore of the wretched. I turn into a giant rebel, killing and burning. The waves roar. The sea releases the breath it has been holding till we cross. Its mountains explode as raging waves, submerging Pharaoh and his armies. They beat the water with their hands; their chests fill up with brine; their remains float on the water.

The world quiets down. It becomes empty, clear.

We are at the moment of beginning.

I'm still moving as I sit on the ground, watching the

An Arabian Mosaic

sea: the movement of the water takes me on a journey across the whole world. My heart is a bird that has left my breast to flutter on a horizon where the earth joins the sky. My body is a ship that stops at harbors to take provisions, then continues its travels.

I will not return . . . until the sea has swallowed all the Pharaohs.

Biographical Notes on Authors

Ulfa al-Idilbi A Syrian author, born in 1912 in Damascus. She has published four collections of short stories and a novel, *Damascus: A Smile of Sorrow*, which was made into a movie by the Syrian Cinema Institute. The story "The Breeze of Youth" ("Nasamat al-Siba") is from the collection *Wada'an Ya Dimashq* (Damascus, 1963).

Ihsan Kamal An Egyptian fiction writer, born in 1935. She has many collections of short stories to her credit, and has twice won the Story Contest of the Story Club in Egypt: in 1957, and in 1960. Several of her stories have been made into film and television productions. The story "A Mistake in the Knitting" ("Satr Maghlut") is the title story of a collection published in Cairo in 1971.

Alifa Rifaat An Egyptian author, born in 1930 in Cairo. She was brought up as a devout Muslim, and because of her early marriage did not pursue formal education after secondary school. She has traveled widely in Egypt with her husband, a police officer. First published under a pseudonym, her work has, since 1972, been published under her own name. Several of her stories have been translated into English. The story "My Wedding Night" ("Hadhihi Laylati") is from the collection *Man Yakun al-Rajul?* (Cairo, 1981).

Samira Azzam (1927–1967) A Palestinian short-story writer who, from 1948 until her death, lived in Lebanon and Iraq. She published four collections of short stories; the fifth appeared posthumously. Her volume *The Hour and the Man* (1963) won the prize of the Lebanese Association of Friends of the Book. The story “Tears for Sale” (“Dumu‘ lil-Bay‘”) is from the collection *al-Zil al-Kabir* (Beirut, 1956).

Daisy al-Amir An Iraqi short-story writer, born in 1935 in Basra. She has a bachelor’s degree from the Teachers’ Training College in Baghdad. In 1963 she went to Beirut and chose to stay there, first working as an employee of the Iraqi embassy, then as Director of the Iraqi Cultural Center. She has published several collections of short stories in which, as in the one translated here, she voices her response to the civil war. The story “The Future” (“al-Mustaqbal”) is from the collection *Fi Dawwamat al-Hubb wa al-Karahiya* (Beirut, 1979). The story “The Cat, the Maid, and the Wife” (“al-Qitta wa al-Khadima wa al-Zawja”) is from the collection *Wu‘ud lil-Bay‘* (Beirut, 1981).

Hanan al-Shaykh A Lebanese fiction writer from a conservative Shiite-Muslim family, born in 1947. She received her secondary education in Beirut, and in 1963 went to the American College for Girls in Cairo, where she stayed for four years and wrote her first novel. She traveled to Saudi Arabia, then went back to Lebanon, but after the outbreak of the civil war she left for England and settled in London. She has published three novels and a volume of short stories. The story “The Persian Rug” (“al-Sajjada al-‘Ajamiyya”) is from the collection *Wardat al-Sakhra’* (Beirut, 1982).

Nawal al-Saadawi A leading feminist writer, born in Egypt in 1930. She received a degree in medicine from Cairo University, then served as a physician in various public posts, including Director of Health Education in the Ministry of Health. She has published several novels, collections of short stories, and social studies, of which *Woman and Sex* and *The Hidden Face of Eve* have gained much publicity. Under Sadat’s regime, she was imprisoned for several months on account of her political views and activities. Her books have been translated into a number of European languages. The story “The Picture” (“al-Sura”) is from the collection *Kanat Hiya al-Ad‘af* (Beirut, 1979).

Latifa al-Zayat An Egyptian writer, born in 1945. She holds a master’s degree in English literature from Cairo University, and a doctorate in translation from the University of Ein Shams, where she works as a professor. She has published critical studies on English literature, and on the Egyptian novel and Egyptian drama. Her fiction includes a novel entitled *al-Bab al-Maftuh* (1960), and a volume of short stories entitled *al-Shuykhukha wa Qisas Ukhra* (Cairo, 1986). The story “The Picture” (“al-Sura”) is from that volume.

Layla al-Uthman A Kuwaiti fiction writer, born in 1945. Her formal education did not extend beyond secondary school, but she expanded it by wide reading in Arabic and in Western literature. Considered a leading woman writer in the Arabian Peninsula, she has published two novels and several collections of short stories. The story “The Picture” (“al-Sura”) is from the collection *Fi al-Layl Ta’ti al-‘Uyun* (Beirut, 1980).

May Ziyada (1895–1941) A Palestinian writer, born

and educated in Nazareth. Her father, a well-known Lebanese journalist, took his family to Egypt in 1908 and settled in Cairo. She is considered a pioneer woman writer in modern Arabic literature. Her literary output is varied and includes essays, poems, and short stories. The story "The Lady with the Story" ("Hikayat al-Sayyida Allati Laha Hikaya") is from a posthumous publication entitled *Sawanih Fata* (Beirut, 1975). This is the first story by her to appear in English.

Layla Bin Mami A Tunisian fiction writer, born in Djebra in 1944. She studied in Tunis and received three degrees in Arabic. She writes in Arabic. The appearance of her collection of short stories, provocatively entitled *A Burning Minaret* (*Sawma'a Tahtariq*; Tunis, 1968), created an uproar similar to that caused by Layla Baalbakki's *A Spaceship of Tenderness to the Moon*. The story "I Want Him a Free Man" ("Uriduhu Hurran") is from the above-mentioned collection. This is her first appearance in English.

Kulit Suhayl al-Khuri A Syrian poet, novelist, and short-story writer, born in 1937 in Damascus. She comes from a wealthy Catholic family and was educated both in Arabic and in French. Her poetry is written in French, but the fiction—short stories and novels—in Arabic. She currently lectures at the University of Damascus. The story "Where To?" ("Ila Ayna?") is from the collection *Ana wa al-Mada* (Beirut, 1962).

Layla Baalbakki A Lebanese fiction writer from a conservative Shiite-Muslim family, born in 1936. Her first novel, *I Live*, has been translated into French and other European languages. She has published another novel, and a collection of short stories entitled *A Space-*

ship of Tenderness to the Moon (*Safinat Hanan ila al-Qamar*; Beirut, 1963). The stories landed her in court on charges of obscenity and damaging public morality, but she was eventually acquitted. The story "The Cat" ("al-Qitta") is from the above-mentioned collection.

Hayat Ibn al-Shaykh A Tunisian author, born in 1943 in Tunis. She writes in Arabic and has published poetry and fiction. Her first collection of short stories, *Without a Man* (*Bi-la Rajul*), appeared in Tunis in 1979. It was followed by another collection, *Tomorrow the Sun of Freedom Will Rise* (*Wa Ghadan Tushriq Shams al-Hurriyya*) in 1983. The story "A Woman Worth Less than Nothing" ("Imra'a taht al-Sifr") is from the first collection. This is her first appearance in English.

Sufi Abdallah An Egyptian writer from a conservative Muslim background, born in 1925 in al-Fayyum. She studied in French, English, and Italian schools, and began to publish in 1942 by contributing essays and short stories to different journals and magazines. In 1955 she became the editor of the column "Your Problem" in the women's magazine *Hawwa* (*Eve*). A prolific writer, her literary output is varied and includes novels, plays, and hundreds of stories that have appeared in several volumes. The story "Half a Woman" ("Nisf Imra'a") is the title story of a collection published in Cairo in 1962.

Rafiqat al-Tabia Pseudonym for Zaynab Fahmi, a Moroccan fiction writer born in Casablanca in 1940. She is currently the head of a girls' school in Mohammedia. She writes in Arabic and has published three collections of short stories. The story "A Man and a Woman" ("Rajul wa Imra'a") is the title story of a collection published in

Casablanca in 1969. This is her first appearance in English.

Ghada Samman A leading poet and fiction writer, born in the Syrian village al-Shamiyya in 1942. Her father was first Rector of the University of Damascus, then Minister of Education. She obtained her B.A. in English literature from the University of Damascus. In 1964 she went to Lebanon and completed her M.A. at the American University in Beirut. She has worked as a translator, university lecturer, columnist, and journalist. She has written short stories, novels, poetry, and literary criticism. In 1977 she founded her own publishing company. In 1984 the Lebanese civil war forced her to leave Beirut for Paris, where she currently resides. Her works have been translated into a number of European languages. The story "Another Scarecrow" ("Faza' Tuyur Akhar") is from the collection *Layl al-Ghuraba'* (Beirut, 1966).

Khayriyya al-Saqqaf A Saudi short-story writer, born in Mecca in 1951. She received a bachelor's degree from the Girls' University College in Riyadh in 1973, and a master's degree from the University of Missouri in 1976. She has worked as editor of the women's section of the daily newspaper *Riyadh*, and as a lecturer at the Girls' University College. She writes articles and gives radio talks and public lectures. The story "The Second and the Truth" ("al-Thaniyya wa al-Haqiqa") is from the collection *An Tubhir nahwa al-Ab'ad* (Riyadh, 1982).

Sharifa al-Shamlan A Saudi writer, born in 1947. She studied journalism at the Girls' University College in Riyadh, from which she graduated in 1968. She currently works as the head of social services in the eastern part of her country. She has published short stories and

essays in various magazines. The story "Fragments from a Life" ("Maqati' min al-Haya") appeared in the Lebanese journal *al-Adab* (no. 4-6, April-June, 1987).

Sakina Fuad An Egyptian fiction writer, born in Port Said in 1944. She studied journalism at the University of Cairo and is currently the editor of the magazine *Radio and Television*, where she publishes critical reviews of Egyptian radio and television programs. She has published several volumes of short stories, many of which were made into film and television productions. The story "Pharaoh Is Drowning Again" ("al-Fir'un Yaghraq min Jadid") is from the collection *Millaf Qadiyyat Hubb* (Cairo, 1977). This is her first appearance in English.

Dalya Cohen-Mor, the translator of these stories, received her Ph.D. in Arabic language and literature from Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., and her M.A. in English language and literature from the State University of Utrecht, the Netherlands. She has lived and worked in the Middle East, Europe, and the United States. Her publications include *Yusuf Idris: Changing Visions* and *Yusuf Idris: The Piper Dies and Other Stories*. She is currently engaged in research into modern Arabic literature, with particular interest in the short story.