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Two Stories by Luay Hamza Abbas

by **Yasmeen Hanoosh**

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Closing His Eyes (Ighmadh al-'Aynayn) is a collection of seventeen short stories written between 2003-2007. It is the fourth and latest collection of short stories by Iraqi novelist, literary critic and short story writer Luay Hamza Abbas (published by Azmina, Amman, 2008). Through this collection, Luay Hamza Abbas' talent as a storyteller has been acknowledged with national and international awards. The most recent of these is the Iraqi Ministry of Culture Award for Creative Short Story (2010) for his story bearing the title of the collection. "Closing His Eyes" has also won the Kikah Best Short Story Award in London in 2006.



[Image from Unknown Archive]

Abbas' literary works began to attract the attention of Iraqi and Arab literary critics since the appearance of his first collection of short stories, *On a Bicycle at Night*, in 1997 and his novel, *The Prey*, in 2005. Abbas has created for himself a singular

voice within the contemporary literary scene in Iraq for numerous reasons. His ability to locate the textual balance between imaginary and factual events allows his fiction to portray the experience of war and to historicize the subjective encounter with violence and death without reiterating political events or explicitly invoking the often-employed symbols of Iraqi authoritarianism. Space, public and private, as a key component of human identity also receives a particularly complex treatment in Abbas' fiction. This attentive and successful treatment of space, coupled with the introduction of subtle elements of magical realism, has not been witnessed in Iraqi literature, in my opinion, since Muhammed Khudayyir' *Basrayatha* (1996). His voice is one of the most important literary voices to have emerged in Iraq during the post-Saddam era.

The stories of the collection offer multiple articulations of the everyday violence lived by ordinary people in Iraq during the past decade. Without sacrificing its spatial or historical particularity, Abbas was able in these stories to portray the Iraqi experience as a universal one of fear, disillusionment, nihilism and liminality. Through minimalist sketches of nebulous characters who transgress various Iraqi spaces like apparitions, without fully inhabiting them, Abbas paints the shifting, tenuous contours of the collective identity in a country that has gradually but chronically lost its quotidian stability and cultural definiteness. Ambiguity and abstraction are the qualities that distinguish Abbas' short works in this collection. The duality of dream and reality, of lucidity and delirium, and the absence of direct references to names of historical events and places all provide for a literary context where the subjective experience of violent death—unjustified murder in particular—is masterfully communicated.

Two Stories by Luay Hamza Abbas

The Logic of Birds

1

In the mountains of China there once was a man preoccupied with breaking stones. His eyes poured tears onto the ground, and his tears turned into stone. Every time I open the book *The Logic of Birds*, Farid Ud-Din Attar's story leads me, somehow, to writing. Perhaps because it takes place outside of the boundaries of the possible, inside the ordeal, the illusory, and the impossible. What unites the deed of the man with the deeds of writing inside me is the pain produced by each of them, the pain that is not devoid of a remote hope, where one man is busy destroying a mountain. Difficult as his task may be, so is writing an act that is perpetually longing in its attempt to cull out the surreptitious meaning of life, which is always located in extreme human experiences, beyond the obvious, possible, and bounded. The experience that is renewed with each new

writing as if it were lived for the first time is the experience that drives today's human being to live a perpetual state of tension as he stands face to face with destruction, death, torture, and solitude. He is, to use Ernesto Sabato's expression, "the human being is of extremes, and he has arrived, or is about to arrive, at the end of his tether." Man seems, in this ending, confronting the world alone, and at the core of his loneliness, he carries on with his hope...

2

With the destruction of the stone and the invention of the word the two images intertwine and the scene is conflated. A tear is shed (from the man's eye or the writer's?). It falls on the ground only to transform, through continuous magic, into the matter that builds the world from stone and words.

3

On the edge of the 1980s' war, approximately a quarter of a century of Iraqi time, a generation of Iraqi writers was born. And theirs was another story. No mountains existed before them to demarcate their steep descent to the bottom of the ordeal. Nor did mountains exist to make them face the illusion in order to accomplish worlds that did not aspire to replicate the world as it is, or to demolish it for the sake of erecting an alternative world. They were driven by their ambition to invent discrete worlds amidst the smells of blood and ashes. At the time, the homeland was not a homeland; it was a barrack encased in war songs in the oblivion of the desert.

Those who died, died, as the tales say, and those who lived, lived to find themselves, after a quarter of a century had passed swiftly, to be stepping inside *The Logic of Birds*. They are now resting on the page in which the man is busy breaking stones. They were not, through the dream of writing, to escape their homeland, which did not resemble a homeland during its murder heyday. They were, rather, searching for what bestowed life—this impossible word—a meaning. They are propelled by their ambition to invent their meanings, where tears, at the end of the tale, transform into stone, and words expand enough so as to become a homeland.

A Call

A feeling, a strange one, was welling up inside him since the day began. He felt it mount with his breaths and diffuse about him until it almost became visible. After the cup of tea, he decided to finish reading the book. He thumbed through it slowly as he retrieved its events with their streets and the faces of their protagonists. It surprised him that one particular story had lingered in his mind. He saw the man in it roam the streets of Cairo, leaving one street with its crowds and the commotion of its vendors to enter another street. When he felt hunger, he entered a famous restaurant on the bank of the Nile. He had, after a chat with the boy who waited tables, a bowl of fava beans. As he read, he breathed in the smells of the old city, touched its walls, and felt the habits of its people. He closed the book and thought of partaking in the pleasure of the man. He left his apartment in his pajamas. He left the door ajar and walked through the long corridor, on freshly washed floors, and then he descended the staircase of the three floors and bought, from Fortune Shop on the ground floor, a can of fava beans with two hooked chili peppers on the lid, and returned to warm it up with a dash of oil.

His cell phone beeped, and he was immediately swept by that feeling that he had pretended to forget for a bit. To assuage the anxiety of phone calls, he had chosen an ascending tune for his machine. It began in low volume that could barely be heard, as if irrelevant to him. Then he would let the tune lead him to the place of the phone, which he often forgot where he had put. The caller was a distant friend, who said, in a clear voice, after a sentence or two during which he seemed in a hurry, that he was Mahmoud. This took his mind to another Mahmoud so he asked him about himself. The voice answered him, without decreasing its tension, that he was Mahmoud, Mahmoud Nasir. So he repeated his welcoming notes while his anxiety grew. The man asked him directly if something had happened in Amara. He answered after some hesitation that the situation was normal. The other man repeated his question as if he had not heard his answer, and added,

-Is your neighbor Qasim OK?

The clarity of the question overwhelmed him. He tried to make sure he heard it correctly, but then he remembered the aluminum door of Qasim's empty apartment, wide open. He was shocked that he did not notice how empty the floor was for this time of day. The voice of the other man was breaking as he begged him to check. He said he would call him again. Steam was rising, and the apartment had filled with the aroma of fava beans.

[Translated by Yasmeen Hanoosh. From *Ighmad al-'Aynayn* (Amman: Azmina, 2008)]

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