SEASON OF MIGRATION
TO THE NORTH

TAYEB SALIH

Translated from the Arabic by
DENYS JOHNSON-DAVIES

Introduction by
LAILA LALAMI

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS
New York
In 1966, when Tayeb Salih's novel *Season of Migration to the North* was published in Beirut, most Arab and African nations had already achieved independence from European colonial rule. The Sudan, where Salih was born and raised, had been under home rule for a decade; the Congo, once the personal estate of King Leopold II, had won its freedom six years before; and Algeria, whose war of liberation cost the lives of one million people, had recently declared its independence. The mood in the newly established nations was defiant, passionate, full of hope. Ahmed Sékou Touré told Charles de Gaulle that, "There is no dignity without liberty. We prefer liberty in poverty to wealth in slavery." In his first state speech, Kwame Nkrumah declared, "We are going to demonstrate to the world, to the other nations, that we are prepared to lay our own foundation." Patrice Lumumba promised his countrymen, "We are going to begin a new struggle, a sublime struggle, which will lead our country to peace, prosperity, and greatness."

Not long after independence, Sékou Touré turned into a brutal dictator who tolerated no dissent. In the course of his twenty-six-year reign, thousands of Guineans were jailed in concentration camps. Nkrumah, too, started to stifle dissent in Ghana and was later overthrown in a military coup, while he was on a state visit to Vietnam. As for Lumumba, he had no time to govern. Barely three months after his election, he was
assassinated by Congolese rivals, who were working in collusion with Belgian and American intelligence services.

Salih chronicles this bitter start to the postcolonial age. In *Season of Migration to the North*, a local community representative—a man of limited formal education and long practical experience—explains how independence movements, though necessary and rightful, would at first lead to a succession of rulers who would treat their people no differently than the colonizers:

[The British] sowed hatred in the hearts of the people for us, their kinmen, and love for the colonizers, the intruders. Mark these words of mine, my son. Has not the country become independent? Have we not become free men in our own country? Be sure, though, that they will direct our affairs from afar. This is because they have left behind them people who think as they do.

Later on in the novel, the main character, who has been educated in London and become a renowned economist, echoes this pronouncement: “The schools were started so as to teach us to say ‘Yes’ in their language.”

So precise is Salih’s assessment of both the colonial and the postcolonial condition, and so perceptive is his discussion of racial relationships under and after empire, that the novel continues to be widely read, discussed, and studied today, more than forty years after its publication. But what makes *Season of Migration to the North* such an enduring book is also its literary accomplishment: Salih’s masterful use of time, his depiction of place, his prose style, his seamless use of oral literary forms. Reading the text in Arabic, it is easy to see why a group of leading Arab critics joined together in 1976 to declare him “the genius of the Arabic novel.”

Salih was born in 1929 in Ed-Debbi, a village on the banks of the Nile, in the northern province of the Sudan. His parents, Muhammad and Aisha, were local farmers. Salih went to the primary school in his village, but transferred to Port Sudan for junior high and to Omdurman for high school. At the University of Khartoum, he studied natural sciences, though he appears to have left without graduating. For a while he worked as a schoolteacher, but in 1953, at the age of twenty-four, he decided to move to Great Britain. He completed a degree in international relations at the University of London and worked for the BBC Arabic Service, where he eventually became director of the drama section. A few years later, he relocated to Qatar to serve as director-general for the Ministry of Information. He moved once again, this time to Paris, to work for UNESCO and serve as its representative in Qatar and Jordan. He later returned to London, where he lived until his death in 2009.

Salih has written only a handful of works, but each has been well received and widely translated. His first book, published in Beirut in 1960, was *Dawmat Wad Hamid: Sab’ Qisas (The Down Tree of Wad Hamid: Seven Stories)*, a collection of short stories set in a fictional village in the northern Sudan. His second book was a novella titled *‘Urs az-Zayn (The Wedding of Zein)*, published in 1962. This novella, and two of the stories from Salih’s debut collection, were translated into English by Denys Johnson-Davies and published in 1969 under the title *The Wedding of Zein and Other Stories*.

Salih’s third book, and the novel that would make his reputation, was *Mawsim al-Hijrah ila ash-Shamal (Season of Migration to the North)*. First serialized in the Lebanese magazine *Hiwar* in 1966, it was published in book form in 1967. Johnson-Davies worked closely with Salih on the text, translating portions of it soon after the author finished writing them. Heinemann published the novel in its African Writers Series in 1969, and it has been in print in various English-language editions ever since.
INTRODUCTION

Another novel would follow, Bandarshab. This was conceived as a trilogy, the first two volumes of which (Dau al-Beit and Meryoud) were published in 1971 and 1976. Salih has said in interviews that he continues to work on the third volume, but this has so far not appeared in print anywhere. He has, however, been writing regular columns on literature, culture, and politics for the London-based Arabic magazine Al-Majalah, and those have been collected in nine volumes, published as Mukhtarat in 2004.

Season of Migration to the North begins with the return of an unnamed Sudanese man to his village on the banks of the Nile, after seven years spent studying poetry in Great Britain. At a gathering of family and friends, he notices a stranger, a middle-aged man who has remained silent while everyone else has been asking questions about life in distant Europe. The stranger turns out to be a certain Mustafa Sa‘eed, who moved to the village from the capital of Khartoum. Intrigued by the presence of a city man in an ancestral town, the narrator wants to know more, but Sa‘eed is reluctant to talk about himself. One night, after a few drinks, Sa‘eed begins to recite poetry in English. The narrator is shocked, not having expected that anyone in the village besides him would know any English poetry. Relentlessly, he asks Sa‘eed about his life, until Sa‘eed gives in.

And so begins the story within the story, also told in the first person: Sa‘eed is born in Khartoum at the turn of the century and loses his father at a young age. Without telling his mother, he enrolls in a local grade school run by English missionaries. The headmaster, taking note of Sa‘eed’s natural talents, recommends that he continue on to high school. Sa‘eed journeys by train (by himself) to Cairo, where he lives with friends of the schoolmaster. After high school, he leaves Cairo behind, this time traveling to London, where he studies economics. He befriends many white women, of different backgrounds and levels of education, and uses their stereotypical expectations of him—they see him “tropical climes, cruel sun, purple horizons”—to seduce them. Finally, he meets Jean Morris.

Unlike the other women, Morris doesn’t give in to Sa‘eed so easily. He pursues her until she agrees to marry him, but their union ends in tragedy; he murders her, in what appears to be a bizarre act of erotic fulfillment. After serving his sentence, he returns to the Sudan, moves to the village of Wad Hamid, and marries a local woman, to whom he is, by all accounts, a perfect husband. He fathers two children and leads a quiet life. The story doesn’t quite satisfy the narrator, and the mystery that surrounds Mustafa Sa‘eed only grows when he disappears, leaving behind a will in which he names the narrator as his trustee, begging him to spare the two children “the pangs of wanderlust.”

The narrator moves to Khartoum, where he becomes a civil servant, slowly rising through the postcolonial hierarchy. He wants to forget about Mustafa Sa‘eed, but on a visit to the village, he finds out that Sa‘eed’s widow, Hosna Bint Mahmoud, is being pressured to marry an elderly womanizer. Now the narrator is confronted with his responsibility as trustee, a position he neither sought nor desired. His unwillingness—or inability—to act leads to yet another tragedy.

Readers of Season of Migration to the North will undoubtedly notice the parallels with the story of Othello. In Shakespeare’s play, the Moor wins over Desdemona partly because of the stories of “distressful stroke” he has told her, and to which she listened “with a greedy ear.” Likewise, Sa‘eed consciously makes use of Orientalist clichés to woo British women. Recounting his sexual exploits to the narrator, he says, “I related to her fabricated stories about deserts of golden sands and jungles where
INTRODUCTION

non-existent animals called out to one another." He explicitly makes references to the model he is following: "I'm like Othello—Arab-African."

But there are also notable contrasts. Desdemona's handkerchief was stolen from her and she in fact remained faithful to Othello. Jean Morris, however, purposefully leaves a handkerchief for Sa'eed to discover and is openly unfaithful to him. She seems to want to reenact the Shakespearean plot at any price. By being unfaithful, she essentially challenges Sa'eed to follow his hero to the end. He succumbs to the temptation, though by the time of his trial he has come to realize, "I am no Othello. Othello was a lie." The Orientalist images advanced in Othello are illusions, Salih seems to be saying, and so long as East-West encounters are based on illusions, they are doomed to end in tragedy.

In Season of Migration to the North, Salih has also consciously chosen to use the motif of the hero's voyage into the unknown, which was portrayed in many novels published at the height of the colonial era and whose best and most famous exemplar remains Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness. However, Salih subverts the conventions of the literary genre so that instead of having a white European man travel to the far depths of the Congo, he has a black Arab-African man journey to the very heart of England. Where Kurtz attempts to connect with his emotions and reject his intellect, Mustafa Sa'eed rids himself of any emotion and clings with all his might to his intellectual powers:

"Mr. Sa'eed, you're a person quite devoid of a sense of fun," Mrs. Robinson used to say to me and it was true that I never used to laugh. "Can't you ever forget your intellect?" she would say...

Kurtz uses the guns given to him by the Company to subdue and control the native tribes, who believe his weapons are lightning bolts (symbols of power) while Sa'eed uses the stereotypes British women have about Arab and African men (beliefs that are based on illusions and lies) to lure them into his bed.

Both Conrad and Salih expose the perils of colonialism, but while Conrad reserves his strongest condemnation for the greed and theft that attend imperial expansion, Salih questions the entire enterprise. Colonialism is repeatedly described in language that evokes violent infection, a declaration of freedom from which will not suffice to guarantee good health. He criticizes the efforts spent getting a foreign education that is of little practical use to a newly established state (the narrator has spent seven years studying "an obscure English poet" only to teach pre-Islamic poetry in primary schools), predicts the rise of an authoritarian bourgeois class that will pick up where the colonial powers left off, and describes the disappointment that soon followed independence.

Nonetheless, as an antidote to the infection of colonialism, Salih also seeks to bring out the abiding commonalities of human experience. Early on in Season of Migration to the North, for instance, the narrator is asked by his family and friends about people in London:

"Are there any farmers among them?" Mahjoub asked me.

"Yes, there are some farmers among them. They've got everything—workers and doctors and farmers and teachers, just like us." I preferred not to say the rest that had come to my mind: that just like us they are born and die, and in the journey from the cradle to the grave they dream dreams some of which come true and some of which are frustrated; that they fear the unknown, search for love and seek contentment in wife and child; that some are strong and some are weak; that some have been
INTRODUCTION

given more than they deserve by life, while others have been deprived by it, but that the differences are narrowing and most of the weak are no longer weak.

The “Other,” Salih seems to say, is not much different from the “Self.” This challenge of the dichotomy of Self and Other is particularly evident in a series of dualities around which he has deftly structured the novel. The two main characters in the book, the unnamed narrator and Mustafa Saeed, travel between north and south; they move between Eastern and Western traditions; they speak English and Arabic; they live, at one point or another, in a village and in a city; they are foreign men in a white world, or foreign-educated men in a black world. Perhaps most refreshing of all is that Islam is portrayed in the book as it is lived, not as it is imagined in the West (or the East, for that matter). The characters appear to consider religion one part of their lives, but are not defined by it. The story itself presents a duality for the reader: it is an oral story, as indicated by its beautiful first line: “It was, gentlemen, after a long absence—seven years to be exact, during which time I was studying in Europe—that I returned to my people.” But it is told in a European literary form, the novel.

Season of Migration to the North isn’t the first book in which a writer of color has decided to “write back” to the empire, of course. Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s The River Between (1965), Camara Laye’s The Radiance of the King (1954), and Aimé Césaire’s A Tempest (1969), for instance, can all be seen as attempts to subvert European colonial discourse. But Season of Migration to the North is unique among these books in that it is written in the author’s native language, rather than the colonial one. Indeed, Salih stands out among African writers of his generation for his insistence on continuing to use Arabic in spite of having lived the majority of his life outside the Sudan. (“It’s a matter of principle,” he once told an interviewer.)

Salih, however, took a different approach from that of Arab writers belonging to the Nahda—the literary renaissance movement that came into being in Egypt starting in the late nineteenth century, and which was still influential at the time Salih was writing. Proponents of the Nahda were usually men who had gone on their own migrations to the north and returned to Egypt determined to emulate European civilization. But their views tended to be quite schizophrenic, in that they believed in material modernity (scientific, technological, and artistic) within the moral framework of Islamic traditions. Nahda writers such as Taha Hussein, or Tawfiq al-Hakim, or Yahya Haqqi, like their European counterparts, produced their own brand of essentialist novels. For instance, in Haqqi’s Qindil Umm Hashim (The Lamp of Umm Hashim, published in 1944), a British-educated Egyptian doctor is only able to heal his cousin when he uses a curative oil from a local saint’s tomb.

This kind of rosy conciliation between modernity and tradition, a hallmark of Nahda-era novels, is absent from Salih’s novel. The narrator initially thinks that his seven-year migration is a mere parenthesis, and that life can resume its course for him, but he soon discovers that he has been permanently changed. His doctorate in poetry has not prepared him for the tasks he has to take up in a newly independent country, and he is reduced to having to follow along, while the leaders of the ruling party—to which he belongs—drive the country to ruin. Meanwhile, in Wad Hamid, modernity arrives, unexpected and uninvited, and doesn’t necessarily result in a happier life.

Whereas Nahda writers might have also shied away from discussing sexuality openly, Salih lets his male characters gossip about their sexual escapades, and includes a woman in the group—the “daring and uninhibited” Bint Majzoub, who
INTRODUCTION

smokes, drinks, and swears on oath of divorce "like a man." Bint Majzoub is an elderly woman, a friend of the narrator's grandfather, and she sits with the men in the afternoon, smoking cigarettes and sharing stories. At one point, the subject of female circumcision comes up, and a lively back and forth takes place between the characters. Bint Majzoub remains uncharacteristically quiet, while an old man named Bakri proclaims, "Circumcision is one of the conditions of Islam." A stirring condemnation of the practice comes from an unlikely source—Wad Rayyes, an unrepentant womanizer:

The Nigerians, the Egyptians, and the Arabs of Syria, aren't they Moslems like us? But they're people who know what's what and leave their women as God created them. As for us, we do them like you do animals.

Ironically, Wad Rayyes is the first to invoke ancestral traditions when it suits him: he asks the village elders to force a young female character to marry him, despite the fact that she has refused his offers multiple times. As the tragedy that soon strikes the village demonstrates, the clash between social traditions and social modernity does not end well.

The abundant literary references in Season of Migration to the North might give the impression that Salih simply set out to respond to stories—both Eastern and Western—about the Other. But the novel can also be read entirely independently of these references. Indeed, Season is at its most powerful when it is read as a modern Arab-African story: two men who migrate north in pursuit of knowledge and return home to find that, in the intervening years, their country has changed just as much as they have. Who in our modern, global diasporas could remain insensitive to Salih's nostalgic descriptions of Wad Hamid?

I listened intently to the wind: that indeed was a sound well known to me, a sound which in our village possessed a merry whispering—the sound of the wind passing through palm trees is different from when it passes through fields of corn. I heard the cooing of the turtledove, and I looked through the window at the palm tree standing in the courtyard of our house and I knew that all was still well with life.

Soon, however, the exiles' dreams of a glorious return are frustrated. The lives they imagined for themselves back home fail to materialize, and they are confronted with an unshakable sense of loss. The scholar Wail Hassan, who has written extensively about Salih's work, has pointed out that the fictional village of Wad Hamid serves as a setting to nearly all of Salih's stories and novels and that it functions much like William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County or Gabriel García Márquez's Macondo or Naguib Mahfouz's Cairo—a place that is written about with a mixture of nostalgia and critical appraisal.

Season of Migration to the North also stands out because of its compelling use of time. The story begins with the narrator's return to Wad Hamid but from there it bifurcates into two separate narratives: one that continues to move linearly, telling the story of the return, and one that takes us, in various flashbacks, to Mustafa Sa'eed's story. In this way, the novel covers events in real time (the narrator's return to his native land) as well as those that happened more than fifty years earlier (Sa'eed's departure and his return). Salih is a master at handling the balance between the two, so that neither set of events feels too compressed or too slow. The flashbacks, however, are revisited many times, almost in the manner of a mystery novel, and each time Salih gives us a different clue to understanding what happened to Sa'eed. There is a haunting refrain in the flashback sections ("And the train carried me to Victoria Station and to
INTRODUCTION

the world of Jean Morris”) that brings the narrative focus back to the beginning of Sa’eed’s migration. It is as if time were to move in a circular way, always taking us back to the key moment that set Sa’eed on his tragic course.

Salih’s haunting prose is rendered beautifully in Denys Johnson-Davies’ English translation. One of the challenges of translating Arabic is that the text often includes two varieties—the formal, literary variety, usually used in the narrative sections, and the colloquial, spoken variety, sometimes used in dialogue. Salih worked closely with Johnson-Davies on the text, and the collaboration is particularly successful. Author and translator even discussed the possibility of keeping certain passages, deemed too erotic, in the English text, even though Salih had decided to excise them from the Arabic original. In the end, they agreed that the novel should appear in the same form in both languages. In his memoir, Johnson-Davies writes, rather tantalizingly, about these lost paragraphs: “Somewhere among my papers, I possess these particular passages, written out in Tsyeib’s hand.” Still, there are some small differences between the English and the Arabic versions here and there—the word “penis,” for instance, is used in the English-language version but elided with an ellipsis in the original, and the transliteration of certain characters’ names is not entirely consistent.

It is quite rare for an Arabic book to have had such a happy life in translation. The vast majority of Arabic fiction remains untranslated and unavailable to world audiences. A decade ago, Edward Said described his attempts to interest a New York publisher in the work of Naguib Mahfouz—this was before the Nobel Prize win. Said’s suggestions were met with a string of refusals. “When I inquired why,” he wrote, “I was told (with no detectable irony) that Arabic was a controversial language.” There are still too few works of Arabic literature in English and

what is available is not always well translated. This makes Season of Migration to the North even more precious—a masterful Arabic novel in a splendid translation.

Although it was written at the time of the collapse of European colonialism in Africa, Season of Migration to the North remains highly relevant today. As I have mentioned, one of the persistent metaphors in the novel is that of colonialism as a disease—it spreads from one people to the next and from one continent to the next, leaving behind it a steady trail of violence and destruction. At Sa’eed’s trial, the defense lawyer argues that, “These girls were not killed by Mustafa Sa’eed but by the germ of a deadly disease that assailed them a thousand years ago.” The mention of the Roman invasion of Britain might give the reader pause, but this image is expanded upon throughout the novel, its effect growing and becoming clearer with each mention.

Indeed, many years after the trial, while recounting the event to the narrator, Sa’eed adds, “[The British] imported to [the Sudanese] the germ of the greatest European violence, as seen on the Somme and at Verdun, the like of which the world has never previously known, the germ of a deadly disease that struck them more than a thousand years ago.” Still later, when the narrator discusses the prospects of independent Sudan with a local councilman, he is told, “Everyone who is educated today [in the Sudan] wants to sit at a comfortable desk under a fan and live in an air-conditioned house surrounded by a garden, coming and going in an American car as wide as the street. If we do not tear out this disease by the roots we shall have with us a bourgeoisie that is in no way connected with the reality of our life, which is more dangerous to the future of Africa than imperialism itself.” In this way, Salih draws a direct line from
INTRODUCTION

the Roman Empire to the German Empire, from European colonialism to Africa's postcolonial disappointment. Our great tragedy is that we continue to be entirely heedless of the warnings of history.

—LAILA LALAMI

SEASON OF MIGRATION TO THE NORTH
IT WAS, gentlemen, after a long absence—seven years to be exact, during which time I was studying in Europe—that I returned to my people. I learnt much, and much passed me by—but that's another story. The important thing is that I returned with a great yearning for my people in that small village at the bend of the Nile. For seven years I had longed for them, had dreamed of them, and it was an extraordinary moment when I at last found myself standing amongst them. They rejoiced at having me back and made a great fuss, and it was not long before I felt as though a piece of ice were melting inside of me, as though I were some frozen substance on which the sun had shone—that life warmth of the tribe which I had lost for a time in a land "whose fishes die of the cold." My ears had become used to their voices, my eyes grown accustomed to their forms. Because of having thought so much about them during my absence, something rather like fog rose up between them and me the first instant I saw them. But the fog cleared and I awoke, on the second day of my arrival, in my familiar bed in the room whose walls had witnessed the trivial incidents of my life in childhood and the onset of adolescence. I listened intently to the wind: that indeed was a sound well known to me, a sound which in our village possessed a merry whispering—the sound of the wind passing through palm trees is different from when it passes through fields of corn. I heard the cooing of the turtle-dove, and I looked through the window at the palm tree
standing in the courtyard of our house and I knew that all was still well with life. I looked at its strong straight trunk, at its roots that strike down into the ground, at the green branches hanging down loosely over its top, and I experienced a feeling of assurance. I felt not like a storm-swept feather but like that palm tree, a being with a background, with roots, with a purpose.

My mother brought tea. My father, having finished his prayers and recitations from the Koran, came along. Then my sister and brothers came and we all sat down and drank tea and talked, as we have done ever since my eyes opened on life. Yes, life is good and the world as unchanged as ever.

Suddenly I recollected having seen a face I did not know among those who had been there to meet me. I asked about him, described him to them: a man of medium height, of around fifty or slightly older, his hair thick and going grey, beardless and with a moustache slightly smaller than those worn by men in the village; a handsome man.

“That would be Mustafa,” said my father.

Mustafa who? Was he one of the villagers who’d gone abroad and had now returned?

My father said that Mustafa was not a local man but a stranger who had come here five years ago, had bought himself a farm, built a house and married Mahmoud’s daughter—a man who kept himself to himself and about whom not much was known.

I do not know what exactly aroused my curiosity but I remembered that the day of my arrival he was silent. Everyone had put questions to me and I to them. They had asked me about Europe. Were the people there like us or were they different? Was life expensive or cheap? What did people do in winter? They say that the women are unveiled and dance openly with men. “Is it true,” Wad Rayees asked me, “that they don’t marry but that a man lives with a woman in sin?”

As best I could I had answered their many questions. They were surprised when I told them that Europeans were, with minor differences, exactly like them, marrying and bringing up their children in accordance with principles and traditions, that they had good morals and were in general good people.

“Are there any farmers among them?” Mahjoub asked me.

“Yes, there are some farmers among them. They’ve got everything—workers and doctors and farmers and teachers, just like us.” I preferred not to say the rest that had come to my mind: that just like us they are born and die, and in the journey from the cradle to the grave they dream dreams some of which come true and some of which are frustrated; that they fear the unknown, search for love and seek contentment in wife and child; that some are strong and some are weak; that some have been given more than they deserve by life, while others have been deprived by it, but that the differences are narrowing and most of the weak are no longer weak. I did not say this to Mahjoub, though I wish I had done so, for he was intelligent; in my conceit I was afraid he would not understand.

Bint Majzoub laughed. “We were afraid,” she said, “you’d bring back with you an uncircumcised infidel for a wife.”

But Mustafa had said nothing. He had listened in silence, sometimes smiling; a smile which, I now remember, was mysterious, like someone talking to himself.

I forgot Mustafa after that, for I began to renew my relationship with people and things in the village. I was happy during those days, like a child that sees its face in the mirror for the first time. My mother never wearied of telling me of those who had died that I might go and pay my condolences and of those who had married that I might go and offer my congratulations, and thus I crossed the length and breadth of the village offering condolences and congratulations. One day I went to my favourite place at the foot of the tall acacia tree on the river bank.
TAYEB SALIH

How many were the hours I had spent in my childhood under that tree, throwing stones into the river and dreaming, my imagination straying to far-off horizons! I would hear the groaning of the water-wheels on the river, the exchange of shouts between people in the fields, and the lowing of an ox or the braying of a donkey. Sometimes luck would be with me and a steamer would pass by, going up- or down-river. From my position under the tree I saw the village slowly undergo a change: the water-wheels disappeared to be replaced on the bank of the Nile by pumps, each one doing the work of a hundred water-wheels. I saw the bank contracting year after year in front of the thrustin of the water, while on another part it was the water that retreated. Sometimes strange thoughts would come to my mind. Seeing the bank contracting at one place and expanding at another, I would think that such was life: with a hand it gives, with the other it takes. Perhaps, though, it was later that I realized this. In any case I now realize this maxim, but with my mind only, for the muscles under my skin are supple and compliant and my heart is optimistic. I want to take my rightful share of life by force, I want to give lavishly, I want love to flow from my heart, to ripen and bear fruit. There are many horizons that must be visited, fruit that must be plucked, books read, and white pages in the scrolls of life to be inscribed with vivid sentences in a bold hand. I looked at the river—its waters had begun to take on a cloudy look with the alluvial mud brought down by the rains that must have poured in torrents on the hills of Ethiopia—and at the men with their bodies leaning against the ploughs or bent over their hoes, and my eyes take in fields flat as the palm of a hand, right up to the edge of the desert where the houses stand. I hear a bird sing or a dog bark or the sound of an axe on wood—and I feel a sense of stability, I feel that I am important, that I am continuous and integral. No, I am not a stone thrown into the water but seed sown in a field. I go to my grandfather and he talks to me of life forty years ago, fifty years ago, even eighty, and my feeling of security is strengthened. I loved my grandfather and it seems that he was fond of me. Perhaps one of the reasons for my friendship with him was that ever since I was small stories of the past used to intrigue me, and my grandfather loved to reminisce. Whenever I went away I was afraid he would die in my absence. When overcome by yearning for my family I would see him in my dreams; I told him this and he laughed and said, “When I was a young man a fortune-teller told me that if I were to pass the age when the Prophet died—that’s to say sixty—I’d reach a hundred.” We worked out his age, he and I, and found he had about twelve more years to go.

My grandfather was talking to me of a tyrant who had ruled over the district in the days of the Turks. I do not know what it was that brought Mustafa to mind but suddenly I remembered him and said to myself that I’d ask my grandfather about him, for he was very knowledgeable about the genealogy of everyone in the village and even of people scattered up and down the river. But my grandfather shook his head and said that he knew nothing about him except that he was from the vicinity of Khartoum and that about five years ago he had come to the village and had bought some land. All of the inheritors of this land had, with the exception of one woman, gone away. The man had therefore tempted her with money and bought it from her. Then, four years ago, Mahmoud had given him one of his daughters in marriage.

“Which daughter?” I asked my grandfather.

“I think it was Hosna,” he said. Then he shook his head and said, “That tribe doesn’t mind to whom they marry their daughters.” However, he added, as though by way of apology, that Mustafa during his whole stay in the village had never done anything which could cause offence, that he regularly attended the mosque for Friday prayers, and that he was “always ready to
TAYEB SALIH

give of his labour and his means in glad times and sad"—this was the way in which my grandfather expressed himself.

Two days later I was on my own reading in the early afternoon. My mother and sister were noisily chattering with some other women in the farthest part of the house, my father was asleep, and my brothers had gone out on some errand or other. I was therefore alone when I heard a faint cough coming from outside the house and on getting up I found it was Mustafa carrying a large water melon and a basketful of oranges. Perhaps he saw the surprise on my face.

"I hope I didn't wake you," he said. "I just thought I'd bring some of the first fruit from my field for you to try. I'd also like to get to know you. Noon is not the time for calling—for give me."

His excessive politeness was not lost on me, for the people of our village do not trouble themselves with expressions of courtesy—they enter upon a subject at one fell swoop, visit you at noon or evening, and don't trouble to apologize. I reciprocated his expressions of friendship, then tea was brought.

I scrutinized his face as he sat with bowed head. He was without doubt a handsome man, his forehead broad and generous, his eyebrows set well apart and forming crescent-moons above his eyes; his head with its thick greying hair was in perfect proportion to his neck and shoulders, while his nose was sharply-pointed but with hair sprouting from the nostrils. When he raised his face during the conversation and I looked at his mouth and eyes, I was aware of a strange combination of strength and weakness. His mouth was loose and his sleepy eyes gave his face a look more of beauty than of handsomeness. Though he spoke quietly his voice was clear and incisive. When his face was at rest it gained in strength; when he laughed weakness predominated. On looking at his arms I saw that they were strong, with prominent veins; his fingers none the less were long and elegant, and when one's glance reached them, after taking in his arms and hands, there was the sensation of having all of a sudden descended from a mountain into a valley.

I decided to let him speak, for he had not come at such a time of intense heat unless he had something important to say to me. Perhaps, on the other hand, he had been prompted to come out of pure goodwill. However, he cut across my conjectures by saying, "You're most likely the only person in the village I haven't already had the good fortune of getting to know." Why doesn't he discard this formal politeness, being as we are in a village where the men when roused to anger address one another as "You son of a bitch"?

"I have heard a lot about you from your family and friends."

No wonder, for I used to regard myself as the outstanding young man in the village.

"They said you gained a high certificate—what do you call it? A doctorate?" What do you call it? he says to me. This did not please me for I had reckoned that the ten million inhabitants of the country had all heard of my achievement. "They say you were remarkable from childhood."

"Not at all." Though I spoke thus, I had in those days, if the truth be told, a rather high opinion of myself.

"A doctorate—that's really something."

Putting on an act of humility, I told him that the matter entailed no more than spending three years delving into the life of an obscure English poet.

I was furious—I won't disguise the fact from you—when the man laughed unashamedly and said: "We have no need of poetry here. It would have been better if you'd studied agriculture, engineering or medicine." Look at the way he says "we" and does not include me, though he knows that this is my village and that it is he—not I—who is the stranger.

However, he smiled gently at me and I noticed how the weakness in his face prevailed over the strength and how his eyes really contained a feminine beauty.
“But we’re farmers and think only of what concerns us,” he said with a smile. “Knowledge, though, of whatsoever kind is necessary for the advancement of our country.”

I was silent for a while as numerous questions crowded into my head: Where was he from? Why had he settled in this village? What was he about? However, I preferred to bide my time.

He came to my aid and said: “Life in this village is simple and gracious. The people are good and easy to get along with.”

“They speak highly of you,” I said to him. “My grandfather says you’re a most excellent person.”

At this he laughed, perhaps because he remembered some encounter he had had with my grandfather, and he appeared pleased at what I had said. “Your grandfather—there’s a man for you,” he said. “There’s a man—ninety years of age, erect, keen of eye and without a tooth missing in his head. He jumps nimbly on to his donkey, walks from his house to the mosque at dawn. Ah, there’s a man for you.” He was sincere in what he said—and why not, seeing that my grandfather is a veritable miracle?

I feared that the man would slip away before I had found out anything about him—my curiosity reached such a pitch—and, without thinking, the question came to my tongue: “Is it true you’re from Khartoum?”

The man was slightly taken aback and I had the impression that a shadow of displeasure showed between his eyes. Nevertheless he quickly and skilfully regained his composure. “From the outskirts of Khartoum in actual fact,” he said to me with a forced smile. “Call it Khartoum.”

He was silent for a brief instant as though debating with himself whether he should keep quiet or say any more to me. Then I saw the mocking phantom of a smile hovering round his eyes exactly as I had seen it the first day.

“I was in business in Khartoum,” he said, looking me straight in the face. “Then for a number of reasons, I decided to change over to agriculture. All my life I’ve longed to settle down in this part of the country, for some unknown reason. I took the boat not knowing where I was bound for. When it put in at this village, I liked the look of it. Something inside me told me that this was the place. And so, as you see, that’s how it was. I was not disappointed either in the village or its people.” After a silence he got up, saying that he was off to the fields, and invited me to dinner at his house two days later.

“Your grandfather knows the secret,” he said to me with that mocking phantom still more in evidence round his eyes, as I escorted him to the door and he took his leave of me.

He did not, though, give me the chance of asking: “What secret does my grandfather know? My grandfather has no secrets.” He went off with brisk, energetic step, his head inclined slightly to the left.

When I went to dinner, I found Mahjoub there, together with the Omda, Sa’eed the shopkeeper, and my father. We dined without Mustafa saying anything of interest. As was his wont he listened more than he talked. When the conversation fell away and I found myself not greatly interested in it, I would look around me as though trying to find in the rooms and walls of the house the answer to the questions revolving in my head. It was, however, an ordinary house, neither better nor worse than those of the well-to-do in the village. Like the other houses it was divided into two parts: one for the women and the other containing the diwan or reception-room, for the men. To the right of the diwan I saw a rectangular room of red brick with green windows; its roof was not the normal flat one but triangular like the back of an ox.

Mahjoub and I rose and left the rest. On the way I asked Mahjoub about Mustafa. He told me nothing new but said, “Mustafa’s a deep one.”
I spent two months happily enough in the village and several times chance brought Mustafa and me together. On one occasion I was invited to attend a meeting of the Agricultural Project Committee. It was Mahjoub, the President of the Committee and a childhood friend of mine, who invited me. When I entered, I found that Mustafa was a member of the Committee. They were looking into a matter concerning the distribution of water to the fields. It seemed that certain people, including some members of the Committee, were opening up the water to their fields before the time allocated to them. The discussion became heated and some of them began shouting at each other. Suddenly I saw Mustafa jump to his feet, at which the uproar died down and they listened to him with great respect. Mustafa said it was important that people should submit to the rules of the Project, otherwise things would get out of hand and chaos would reign; especially was it incumbent upon members of the Committee to set a good example, and that if they were to contravene the law they would be punished like anyone else. When he stopped speaking most members of the Committee nodded their heads in approval; those against whom his words had been directed kept silent.

There was not the slightest doubt that the man was of a different clay, that by rights he should have been President of the Committee; perhaps because he was not a local man they had not elected him.

About a week later something occurred that stunned me. Mahjoub had invited me to a drinking session and while we were sitting about chatting along came Mustafa to talk to Mahjoub about something to do with the Project. Mahjoub asked him to sit down, but he declined with apologies. When Mahjoub swore he would divorce if he did not, I once again saw the cloud of irritation wrinkle Mustafa's brows. However, he sat down and quickly regained his usual composure.

Mahjoub passed him a glass, at which he hesitated an instant before he took it and placed it beside him without drinking. Again Mahjoub swore the same oath and Mustafa drank. I knew Mahjoub to be impetuous and it occurred to me to stop him annoying the man, it being quite evident he did not at all wish to join the gathering. On second thoughts, though, I desisted. Mustafa drank the first glass with obvious distaste; he drank it quickly as though it were some unpleasant medicine. But when he came to the third glass he began to slow up and to sip the drink with pleasure, the tension disappeared from the corners of his mouth, and his eyes became even more dreamy and listless. The strength you were aware of in his head, brow and nose became dissolved in the weakness that flowed with the drink over his eyes and mouth. Mustafa drank a fourth glass and a fifth. He no longer needed any encouragement, but Mahjoub was in any case continuing to swear he would divorce if the other did not drink up. Mustafa sank down into the chair, stretched out his legs, and grasped the glass in both hands; his eyes gave me the impression of wandering in far-away horizons. Then, suddenly, I heard him reciting English poetry in a clear voice and with an impeccable accent. It was a poem which I later found in an anthology of poetry about the First World War and which goes as follows:

Those women of Flanders
Await the lost,
Await the lost who never will leave the harbour
They await the lost whom the train never will bring.
To the embrace of those women with dead faces,
They await the lost, who lie dead in the trenches,
The barricade and the mud,
In the darkness of night,
This is Charing Cross Station, the hour’s past one,
There was a faint light,
There was a great pain.

After that he gave a deep sigh, still holding the glass between
his hands, his eyes wandering off into the horizon within him-
self.

I tell you that had the ground suddenly split open and re-
vealed an a finely standing before me, his eyes shooting out
flames, I would not have been more terrified. All of a sudden
there came to me the ghastly, nightmarish feeling that we—the
men grouped together in that room—were not a reality but
merely some illusion. Leaping up, I stood above the man and
shouted at him: “What’s this you’re saying? What’s this you’re
saying?” He gave me an icy look—I don’t know how to describe
it, though it was perhaps a mixture of contempt and annoy-
ance. Pushing me violently aside, he jumped to his feet and
went out of the room with firm tread, his head held high as
though he were something mechanical. Mahjoub, busy laugh-
ing with the rest of the people in the gathering, did not notice
what had occurred.

On the next day I went to him in his field. I found him busy
digging up the ground round a lemon tree. He was wearing
dirty khaki shorts and a rough cotton shirt that came down to
his knees; there were smudges of mud on his face. He greeted
me as usual with great politeness and said, “Some of the branches
of this tree produce lemons, others oranges.”

“What an extraordinary thing!” I said, deliberately speaking
in English.

He looked at me in astonishment and said, “What?” When
I repeated the phrase he laughed and said, “Has your long stay
in England made you forget Arabic or do you reckon we’ve
become anglicized?”

“But last night,” I said to him, “you recited poetry in
English.”

His silence irritated me. “It’s clear you’re someone other than
the person you claim to be,” I said to him. “Wouldn’t it be bet-
ter if you told me the truth?” He gave no sign of being affected
by the threat implicit in my words but continued to dig round
the tree.

“I don’t know what I said or what I did last night,” he said
when he had finished digging, as he brushed the mud from his
hands without looking at me. “The words of a drunken man
should not be taken too seriously. If I said anything, it was the
ramblings of a sleep-talker or the ravings of someone in a fever.
It had no significance. I am this person before you, as known
to everyone in the village. I am nothing other than that—I
have nothing to hide.”

I went home, my head buzzing with thoughts, convinced
that some story lay behind Mustafa, something he did not want
to divulge. Had my ears betrayed me the night before? The
English poetry he had recited was real enough. I had neither
been drunk, nor yet asleep. The image of him sitting in that
chair, legs spread out and the glass held in both hands, was
clear and unequivocal. Should I speak to my father? Should I
tell Mahjoub? Perhaps the man had killed someone somewhere
and had fled from prison? Perhaps he—but what secrets are
there in this village? Perhaps he had lost his memory? It is
said that some people are stricken by amnesia following an ac-
cident. Finally I decided to give him two or three days and if he
did not provide me with the truth, then I would tackle him
about it.

I did not have long to wait, for Mustafa came to see me that
very same evening. On finding my father and brother with me,
he said that he wanted to speak to me alone. I got up and we
I will not conceal from you the fact that I hesitated. But the moment was charged with potentialities and my curiosity was boundless. The long and short of it was that I promised on oath, at which Mustafa pushed a bundle of papers towards me, indicating that I should look at them. I opened a sheet of paper and found it to be his birth certificate: Mustafa Sa’eed, born in Khartoum 16 August 1898, father Sa’eed Othman (deceased), mother Fatima Abdussadek. After that I opened his passport: the name, date and place of birth were the same as in the birth certificate. The profession was given as “student.” The date of issue of the passport was 1916 in Cairo and it had been renewed in London in 1926. There was also another passport, a British one, issued in London in 1919. Turning over the pages, I found it was much stamped: French, German, Chinese and Danish. All this whetted my imagination in an extraordinary manner, I could not go on turning over the pages of the passport. Neither was I particularly interested in looking at the other papers. My face must have been charged with expectancy when I looked at him.

Mustafa went on blowing out smoke from his cigarette for a while. Then he said:

...
"It's a long story, but I won't tell you everything. Some details won't be of great interest to you, while others... As you see, I was born in Khartoum and grew up without a father, he having died several months before I was born. He did none the less leave us something with which to meet our needs—he used to trade in camels. I had no brothers or sisters, so life was not difficult for my mother and me. When I think back, I see her clearly with her thin lips resolutely closed, with something on her face like a mask, I don't know—a thick mask, as though her face were the surface of the sea. Do you understand? It possessed not a single colour but a multitude, appearing and disappearing and intermingling. We had no relatives. She and I acted as relatives to each other. It was as if she were some stranger on the road with whom circumstances had chanced to bring me. Perhaps it was I who was an odd creature, or maybe it was my mother who was odd—I don't know. We used not to talk much. I used to have—you may be surprised—a warm feeling of being free, that there was not a human being, by father or mother, to tie me down as a tent peg to a particular spot, a particular domain. I would read and sleep, go out and come in, play outside the house, loaf around the streets, and there would be no one to order me about. Yet I had felt from childhood that I—that I was different—I mean that I was not like other children of my age: I wasn't affected by anything, I didn't cry when hit, wasn't glad if the teacher praised me in class, didn't suffer from the things the rest did. I was like something rounded, made of rubber: you throw it in the water and it doesn't get wet, you throw it on the ground and it bounces back. That was the time when we first had schools. I remember now that people were not keen about them and so the government would send its officials to scour the villages and tribal communities, while the people would hide their sons—they thought of schools as being a great evil that had come to them with the armies of occupation. I was playing with some boys outside our house when along came a man dressed in uniform riding a horse. He came to a stop above us. The other boys ran away and I stayed on, looking at the horse and the man on it. He asked me my name and I told him. 'How old are you?' he said. 'I don't know,' I said. 'Do you want to study at a school?' 'What's school?' I said to him. 'A nice stone building in the middle of a large garden on the banks of the Nile. The bell rings and you go into class with the other pupils—you learn reading and writing and arithmetic.' 'Will I wear a turban like that?' I said to the man, indicating the dome-like object on his head. The man laughed. 'This isn't a turban,' he said. 'It's a hat.' He dismounted and placed it on my head and the whole of my face disappeared inside it. 'When you grow up,' the man said, 'and leave school and become an official in the government, you'll wear a hat like this.' 'I'll go to school,' I said to the man. He seated me behind him on the horse and took me to just such a place as he had described, made of stone, on the banks of the Nile, surrounded by trees and flowers. We went in to see a bearded man wearing a jibba, who stood up, patted me on the head and said: 'But where's your father?' When I told him my father was dead, he said to me: 'Who's your guardian?' 'I want to go to school,' I said to him. The man looked at me kindly, then entered my name in a register. They asked me how old I was and I said I didn't know, and suddenly the bell rang and I fled from them and entered one of the rooms. Then
the two men came along and led me off to another room, where they sat me down on a chair among other boys. At noon, when I returned to my mother, she asked me where I'd been and I told her what had happened. For a moment she glanced at me curiously, as though she wanted to hug me to her, for I saw that her face had momentarily lit up, that her eyes were bright and her lips had softened as though she wished to smile or to say something. But she did not say anything. This was a turning-point in my life. It was the first decision I had taken of my own free will.

"I don't ask you to believe what I tell you. You are entitled to wonder and to doubt—you're free. These events happened a long time ago. They are, as you'll now see, of no value. I mention them to you because they spring to mind, because certain incidents recall certain others.

At any rate I devoted myself with the whole of my being to that new life. Soon I discovered in my brain a wonderful ability to learn by heart, to grasp and comprehend. On reading a book it would lodge itself solidly in my brain. No sooner had I set my mind to a problem in arithmetic than its intricacies opened up to me, melted away in my hands as though they were a piece of salt I had placed in water. I learnt to write in two weeks, after which I surged forward, nothing stopping me. My mind was like a sharp knife, cutting with cold effectiveness, I paid no attention to the astonishment of the teachers, the admiration or envy of my schoolmates. The teachers regarded me as a prodigy and the pupils began seeking my friendship, but I was busy with this wonderful machine with which I had been endowed. I was cold as a field of ice, nothing in the world could shake me.

"I covered the first stage in two years and in the intermediate school I discovered other mysteries, amongst which was the English language. My brain continued on, biting and cutting like the teeth of a plough. Words and sentences formed themselves before me as though they were mathematical equations; algebra and geometry as though they were verses of poetry. I viewed the vast world in the geography lessons as though it were a chess board. The intermediate was the furthest stage of education one could reach in those days. After three years the headmaster—who was an Englishman—said to me, 'This country hasn't got the scope for that brain of yours, so take yourself off. Go to Egypt or Lebanon or England. We have nothing further to give you.' I immediately said to him: 'I want to go to Cairo.' He later facilitated my departure and arranged a free place for me at a secondary school in Cairo, with a scholarship from the government. This is a fact in my life: the way chance has placed in my path people who gave me a helping hand at every stage, people for whom I had no feelings of gratitude; I used to take their help as though it were some duty they were performing for me.

"When the headmaster informed me that everything had been arranged for my departure to Cairo, I went to talk to my mother. Once again she gave me that strange look. Her lips parted momentarily as though she wanted to smile, then she shut them and her face reverted to its usual state: a thick mask, or rather a series of masks. Then she disappeared for a while and brought back her purse, which she placed in my hand.

"'Had your father lived,' she said to me, 'he would not have chosen for you differently from what you have chosen for yourself. Do as you wish, depart or stay, it's up to you. It's your life and you're free to do with it as you will. In this purse is some money which will come in useful.' That was our farewell: no tears, no kisses, no fuss. Two human beings had walked along a part of the road together, then each had gone his way. This was in fact the last thing she said to me, for I did not see her again. After long years and numerous experiences, I remembered..."
that moment and I wept. At the time, though, I felt nothing whatsoever. I packed up my belongings in a small suitcase and took the train. No one waved to me and I spilled no tears at parting from anyone. The train journeyed off into the desert and for a while I thought of the town I had left behind me; it was like some mountain on which I had pitched my tent and in the morning I had taken up the pegs, saddled my camel and continued my travels. While we were in Wadi Halfa I thought about Cairo, my brain picturing it as another mountain, larger in size, on which I would spend a night or two, after which I would continue the journey to yet another destination.

"I remember that in the train I sat opposite a man wearing clerical garb and with a large golden cross round his neck. The man smiled at me and spoke in English, in which I answered. I remember well that amazement expressed itself on his face, his eyes opening wide directly he heard my voice. He examined my face closely, then said: 'How old are you?' I told him I was fifteen, though actually I was twelve, but I was afraid he might not take me seriously. 'Where are you going?' said the man. 'I'm going to a secondary school in Cairo.' 'Alone?' he said. 'Yes,' I said. Again he gave me a long searching look. Before he spoke I said, 'I like travelling alone. What's there to be afraid of?' At this he uttered a sentence to which at the time I did not pay much attention. Then, with a large smile lighting up his face, he said: 'You speak English with astonishing fluency.'

"When I arrived in Cairo I found Mr. Robinson and his wife awaiting me, Mr. Stockwell (the headmaster in Khartoum) having informed them I was coming. The man shook me by the hand and said, 'How are you, Mr. Sa'eed?' 'Very well thank you, Mr. Robinson,' I told him. Then the man introduced me to his wife, and all of a sudden I felt the woman's arms embracing me and her lips on my cheek. At that moment, as I stood on the platform amidst a welter of sounds and sensations, with the woman's arms round my neck, her mouth on my cheek, the smell of her body—a strange, European smell—tickling my nose, her breast touching my chest, I felt—I, a boy of twelve—a vague sexual yearning I had never previously experienced. I felt as though Cairo, that large mountain to which my camel had carried me, was a European woman just like Mrs. Robinson, its arms embracing me, its perfume and the odour of its body filling my nostrils. In my mind her eyes were the colour of Cairo: grey-green, turning at night to a twinkling like that of a firefly. 'Mr. Sa'eed, you're a person quite devoid of a sense of fun,' Mrs. Robinson used to say to me and it was true that I never used to laugh. 'Can't you ever forget your intellect?' she would say, laughing, and on the day they sentenced me at the Old Bailey to seven years' imprisonment, I found no bosom except hers on which to rest my head. 'Don't cry, dear child,' she had said to me, parting my head. They had no children. Mr. Robinson knew Arabic well and was interested in Islamic thought and architecture, and it was with them that I visited Cairo's mosques, its museums and antiquities. The district of Cairo they loved best was al-Azhar. When our feet weary of walking about we'd take ourselves off to a café close by the al-Azhar Mosque where we would drink tamarind juice and Mr. Robinson would recite the poetry of al-Ma'arri. At that time I was wrapped up in myself and paid no attention to the love they showered on me. Mrs. Robinson was a buxom woman and with a bronze complexion that harmonized with Cairo, as though she were a picture tastefully chosen to go with the colour of the walls in a room. I would look at the hair of her armpits and would have a sensation of panic. Perhaps she knew I desired her. But she was sweet, the sweetest woman I've known; she used to laugh gaily and was as tender to me as a mother to her own son.

"They were on the quayside when the ship set sail with me from Alexandria. I saw her far-away waving to me with her handkerchief, then drying her tears with it, her husband at her
side, his hands on his hips; even at that distance I could almost
see the limpid blueness of his eyes. However I was not sad. My
sole concern was to reach London, another mountain, larger
than Cairo, where I knew not how many nights I would stay.
Though I was then fifteen, I looked nearer twenty, for I was as
taut and firm-looking as an inflated waterskin. Behind me was
a story of spectacular success at school, my sole weapon being
that sharp knife inside my skull, while within my breast was a
hard, cold feeling—as if it had been cast in rock. And when the
sea swallowed up the shore and the waves heaved under the
ship and the blue horizon encircled us, I immediately felt an
overwhelming intimacy with the sea. I knew this green, in-
finite giant, as though it were roving back and forth within my
ribs. The whole of the journey I savoured that feeling of being
nowhere, alone, before and behind me either eternity or noth-
ingness. The surface of the sea when calm is another mirage,
ever changing and shifting, like the mask on my mother's face.
Here, too, was a desert laid out in blue-green, calling me, call-
ing me. The mysterious call led me to the coast of Dover, to
London and tragedy.

"Later I followed the same road on my return, asking myself
during the whole journey whether it would have been possible
to have avoided any of what happened. The string of the bow is
drawn taut and the arrow must shoot forth. I look to
right and left, at the dark greenness, at the Saxon villages stand-
ing on the fringes of hills. The red roofs of houses vaulted like
the backs of cows. A transparent veil of mist is spread above the
valleys. What a great amount of water there is here, how vast
the greenness! And all those colours! The smell of the place is
strange, like that of Mrs. Robinson's body. The sounds have
a crisp impact on the ear, like the rustle of birds' wings. This
is an ordered world; its houses, fields, and trees are ranged in
accordance with a plan. The streams too do not follow a zigzag
course but flow between artificial banks. The train stops at a
station for a few minutes; hurriedly people get off, hurriedly
others get on, then the train moves off again. No fuss.

"I thought of my life in Cairo. Nothing untoward had oc-
curred. My knowledge had increased and several minor inci-
dents had happened to me; a fellow student had fallen in love
with me and had then hated me. 'You're not a human being,'
she had said to me. 'You're a heartless machine.' I had loafed
around the streets of Cairo, visited the opera, gone to the the-
atre, and once I had swum across the Nile. Nothing whatsoever
had happened except that the waterskin had distended further,
the bowstring had become more taut. The arrow will shoot
forth towards other unknown horizons.

"I looked at the smoke from the engine vanishing to where
it is dispersed by the wind and merges into the veil of mist
spread across the valleys. Falling into a short sleep, I dreamt I
was praying alone at the Citadel Mosque. It was illuminated
with thousands of chandeliers, and the red marble glowed as I
prayed alone. When I woke up there was the smell of incense
in my nose and I found that the train was approaching London.
Cairo was a city of laughter, just as Mrs. Robinson was a woman
of laughter. She had wanted me to call her by her first name—
Elizabeth—but I always used to call her by her married name.
From her I learnt to love Bach's music, Keats's poetry, and from
her I heard for the first time of Mark Twain. And yet I enjoyed
nothing. Mrs. Robinson would laugh and say to me, 'Can't you
ever forget your intellect? Would it have been possible to have
avoided any of what happened? At that time I was on the way
back. I remembered what the priest had said to me when I was
on my way to Cairo: 'All of us, my son, are in the last resort
travelling alone.' He was fingering the cross on his chest and
his face lit up in a big smile as he added: 'You speak English
with astonishing fluency.' The language, though, which I now
heard for the first time is not like the language I had learnt at
school. These are living voices and have another ring. My mind
TAYEB SALIH

was like a keen knife. But the language is not my language; I had learnt to be eloquent in it through perseverance. And the train carried me to Victoria Station and to the world of Jean Morris.

“Everything which happened before my meeting her was a premonition; everything I did after I killed her was an apology, not for killing her, but for the lie that was my life. I was twenty-five when I met her at a party in Chelsea. The door, and a long passageway leading to the entrance hall. She opened the door and lingered; she appeared to my gaze under the faint lamplight like a mirage shimmering in a desert. I was drunk, my glass two-thirds empty. With me were two girls; I was saying lewd things to them and they were laughing. She came towards us with wide strides, placing the weight of her body on the right foot so that her buttocks inclined leftwards. She was looking at me as she approached. She stopped opposite me and gave me a look of arrogance, coldness, and something else. I opened my mouth to speak, but she had gone. ‘Who’s that female?’ I said to my two companions.

“London was emerging from the war and the oppressive atmosphere of the Victorian era. I got to know the pubs of Chelsea, the clubs of Hampstead, and the gatherings of Bloomsbury. I would read poetry, talk of religion and philosophy, discuss paintings, and say things about the spirituality of the East. I would do everything possible to entice a woman to my bed. Then I would go after some new prey. My soul contained not a drop of sense of fun—just as Mrs. Robinson had said. The women I enticed to my bed included girls from the Salvation Army, Quaker societies and Fabian gatherings. When the Liberals, the Conservatives, Labour, or the Communists, held a meeting, I would saddle my camel and go. ‘You’re ugly,’ Jean Morris said to me on the second occasion. I’ve never seen an uglier face than yours.’ I opened my mouth to speak but she had gone. At that instant, drunk as I was, I swore I would one day make her pay for that. When I woke up, Ann Hammond was beside me in the bed. What was it that attracted Ann Hammond to me? Her father was an officer in the Royal Engineers, her mother from a rich family in Liverpool. She proved an easy prey. When I first met her she was less than twenty and was studying Oriental languages at Oxford. She was lively, with a gay intelligent face and eyes that sparkled with curiosity. When she saw me, she saw a dark twilight like a false dawn. Unlike me, she yearned for tropical climes, cruel suns, purple horizons. In her eyes I was a symbol of all her hankering. I am South that yearns for the North and the ice. Ann Hammond spent her childhood at a convent school. Her aunt was the wife of a Member of Parliament. In my bed I transformed her into a harlot. My bedroom was a graveyard that looked on to a garden; its curtains were pink and had been chosen with care; the carpeting was of a warm greeness, the bed spacious, with swansdown cushions. There were small electric lights, red, blue, and violet, placed in certain corners; on the walls were large mirrors, so that when I slept with a woman it was as if I slept with a whole harem simultaneously. The room was heavy with the smell of burning sandalwood and incense, and in the bathroom were pungent Eastern perfumes, lotions, ung Guents, powders, and pills. My bedroom was like an operating theatre in a hospital. There is a still pool in the depths of every woman that I knew how to stir. One day they found her dead. She had gassed herself. They also found a small piece of paper with my name on it. It contained nothing but the words: ‘Mr. Sa’eed, may God damn you.’ My mind was like a sharp knife. The train carried me to Victoria Station and to the world of Jean Morris.
TAYEB SALIH

"In the courtroom in London I sat for weeks listening to the lawyers talking about me—as though they were talking about some person who was no concern of mine. The Public Prosecutor, Sir Arthur Higgins, had a brilliant mind. I knew him well, for he had taught me Criminal Law at Oxford and I had seen him before, at this court, in this very same room, tightening his grip on the accused as they stood in the dock. Rarely did anyone escape him. I saw men weeping and fainting after he had finished his cross examination; but this time he was wrestling with a corpse.

"Were you the cause of Ann Hammond's suicide?"
"'I don't know.'
"'And Sheila Greenwood?'
"'I don't know.'
"'And Isabella Seymour?'
"'I don't know.'
"'Did you kill Jean Morris?'
"'Yes.'
"'Did you kill her intentionally?'
"'Yes.'

'It was as though his voice came to me from another world. The man continued skilfully to draw a terrible picture of a werewolf who had been the reason for two girls committing suicide, had wrecked the life of a married woman and killed his own wife—an egoist whose whole life had been directed to the quest of pleasure. Once it occurred to me in my stupor, as I sat there listening to my former teacher, Professor Maxwell Foster-Keen, trying to save me from the gallows, that I should stand up and shout at the court: 'This Mustafa Sa'eed does not exist. He's an illusion, a lie. I ask of you to rule that the lie be killed.' But I remained as lifeless as a heap of ashes. Professor Maxwell Foster-Keen continued to draw a distinctive picture of the mind of a genius whom circumstances had driven to killing in a moment of mad passion. He related to them how I had been appointed a lecturer in economics at London University at the age of twenty-four. He told them that Ann Hammond and Sheila Greenwood were girls who were seeking death by every means and that they would have committed suicide whether they had met Mustafa Sa'eed or not. 'Mustafa Sa'eed, gentlemen of the jury, is a noble person whose mind was able to absorb Western civilization but it broke his heart. These girls were not killed by Mustafa Sa'eed but by the germ of a deadly disease that assailed them a thousand years ago. It occurred to me that I should stand up and say to them: 'This is untrue, a fabrication. It was I who killed them. I am the desert of thirst. I am no Othello. I am a lie. Why don't you sentence me to be hanged and so kill the lie?' But Professor Foster-Keen turned the trial into a conflict between two worlds, a struggle of which I was one of the victims. The train carried me to Victoria Station and to the world of Jean Morris.

"I pursued her for three years. Every day the string of the bow became more taut. It was with air that my waterskins were distended; my caravans were thirsty, and the mirage shimmered before me in the wilderness of longing; the arrow's target had been fixed and it was inevitable the tragedy would take place. 'You're a savage bull that does not weary of the chase,' she said to me one day. 'I am tired of your pursuing me and of my running before you. Marry me.' So I married her. My bedroom became a theatre of war; my bed a patch of hell. When I grasped her it was like grasping at clouds, like bedding a shooting-star, like mounting the back of a Prussian military march. That bitter smile was continually on her mouth. I would stay awake all night warring with bow and sword and spear and arrows, and in the morning I would see the smile unchanged and would know that once again I had lost the combat. It was as though I were a slave Shahrayar you buy in the market for a dinar.
encountering a Scheherazade begging amidst the rubble of a city destroyed by plague. By day I lived with the theories of Keynes and Tawney and at night I resumed the war with bow and sword and spear and arrows. I saw the troops returning, filled with terror, from the war of trenches, of lice and epidemics. I saw them sowing the seeds of the next war in the Treaty of Versailles, and I saw Lloyd George lay the foundations of a public welfare state. The city was transformed into an extraordinary woman, with her symbols and her mysterious calls, towards whom I drove my camels till their entrails ached and I myself almost died of yearning for her. My bedroom was a spring-well of sorrow, the germ of a fatal disease. The infection had stricken these women a thousand years ago, but I had stirred up the latent depths of the disease until it had got out of control and had killed. The theatres of Leicester Square echoed with songs of love and gaiety, but my heart did not beat in time with them. Who would have thought that Sheila Greenwood would have the courage to commit suicide? A waitress in a Soho restaurant, a simple girl with a sweet smile and a sweet way of speaking. Her people were village folk from the suburbs of Hull. I seduced her with gifts and honeyed words, and an unaltering way of seeing things as they really are. It was my world, so novel to her, that attracted her. The smell of burning sandalwood and incense made her dizzy; she stood for a long time laughing at her image in the mirror as she fondled the ivory necklace I had placed like a noose round her beautiful neck. She entered my bedroom a chaste virgin and when she left it she was carrying the germs of self-destruction within her. She died without a single word passing her lips—my storehouse of hackneyed phrases is inexhaustible. For every occasion I possess the appropriate garb.

"Is it not true, by way of example, that in the period between October 1922 and February 1923, that in this period alone you were living with five women simultaneously?"

"Yes."

"And that you gave each one the impression you’d marry her?"

"Yes."

"And that you adopted a different name with each one?"

"Yes."

"That you were Hassan and Charles and Amin and Mustafa and Richard?"

"Yes."

"And yet you were writing and lecturing on a system of economics based on love not figures? Isn’t it true you made your name by your appeal for humanity in economics?"

"Yes."

"Thirty years. The willow trees turned from white to green to yellow in the parks; the cuckoo sang to the spring each year. For thirty years the Albert Hall was crammed each night with lovers of Beethoven and Bach, and the presses brought out thousands of books on art and thought. The plays of Bernard Shaw were put on at The Royal Court and The Haymarket. Edith Sitwell was giving wings to poetry and The Prince of Wales’s Theatre pulsed with youth and bright lights. The sea continued to ebb and flow at Bournemouth and Brighton, and the Lake District flowered year after year. The island was like a sweet tune, happy and sad, changing like a mirage with the changing of the seasons. For thirty years I was a part of all this, living in it but insensitive to its real beauty, unconcerned with everything about it except the filling of my bed each night.

"Yes. It was summer—they said that they had not known a summer like it for a hundred years. I left my house on a Saturday, sniffing the air, feeling I was about to start upon a great hunt. I reached Speakers’ Corner in Hyde Park. It was packed with people. I stood listening from afar to a speaker from the
West Indies talking about the colour problem. Suddenly my eyes came to rest on a woman who was craning her neck to catch a glimpse of the speaker so that her dress was lifted above her knees exposing two shapely, bronzed legs. Yes, this was my prey. I walked up to her, like a boat heading towards the rapids. I stood beside her and pressed up close against her till I felt her warmth pervading me. I breathed in the odour of her body, that odour with which Mrs. Robinson had met me on the platform of Cairo's railway station. I was so close to her that, becoming aware of me, she turned to me suddenly. I smiled into her face—a smile the outcome of which I knew not, except that I was determined that it should not go to waste. I also laughed lest the surprise in her face should turn to animosity. Then she smiled. I stood beside her for about a quarter of an hour, laughing when the speaker's words made her laugh—loudly so that she might be affected by the contagion of it. Then came the moment when I felt that she and I had become like a mare and foal running in harmony side by side. A sound, as though it were not my voice, issued from my throat: 'What about a drink, away from this crowd and heat?' She turned her head in astonishment. This time I smiled—a broad innocent smile so that I might change astonishment into, at least, curiosity. Meanwhile I closely examined her face: each one of her features increased my conviction that this was my prey. With the instinct of a gambler I knew that this was a decisive moment. At this moment everything was possible. My smile changed to a gladness I could scarcely keep in rein as she said: 'Yes, why not?' We walked along together; she beside me, a glittering figure of bronze under the July sun, a city of secrets and rapture. I was pleased she laughed so freely. Such a woman—there are many of her type in Europe—knows no fear; they accept life with gaiety and curiosity. And I am a thirsty desert, a wilderness of southern desires. As we drank tea, she asked me about my home. I related to her fabricated stories about deserts of golden sands and jungles where non-existent animals called out to one another. I told her that the streets of my country teemed with elephants and lions and that during siesta time crocodiles crawled through it. Half-credulous, half-disbelieving, she listened to me, laughing and raising her eyes, her cheeks reddening. Sometimes she would hear me out in silence, a Christian sympathy in her eyes. There came a moment when I felt I had been transformed in her eyes into a naked, primitive creature, a spear in one hand and arrows in the other, hunting elephants and lions in the jungles. This was fine. Curiosity had changed to gaiety, and gaiety to sympathy, and when I stir the still pool in its depths the sympathy will be transformed into a desire upon whose taut strings I shall play as I wish. 'What race are you?' she asked me. 'Are you African or Asian?'

'T'm like Orthello—Arab-African,' I said to her.

'Yes,' she said, looking into my face. 'Your nose is like the noses of Arabs in pictures, but your hair isn't soft and jet black like that of Arabs.'

'Yes, that's me. My face is Arab like the desert of the Empty Quarter, while my head is African and teems with a mischievous childishness.'

'You put things in such a funny way,' she said laughing.

'The conversation led us to my family, and I told her—without lying this time— that I had grown up without a father. Then, returning to my lies, I gave her such terrifying descriptions of how I had lost my parents that I saw the tears well up in her eyes. I told her I was six years old at the time when my parents were drowned with thirty other people in a boat taking them from one bank of the Nile to the other. Here something occurred which was better than expressions of pity; pity in such instances is an emotion with uncertain consequences. Her eyes brightened and she cried out ecstatically:

'The Nile.'

'Yes, the Nile.'
"Then you live on the banks of the Nile?"

"Yes. Our house is right on the bank of the Nile, so that when I'm lying on my bed at night I put my hand out of the window and idly play with the Nile waters till sleep overtakes me."

"Mr. Mustafa, the bird has fallen into the snare. The Nile, that snake god, has gained a new victim. The city has changed into a woman. It would be but a day or a week before I would pitch tent, driving my tent peg into the mountain summit. You, my lady, may not know, but you—like Carnarvon when he entered Tutankhamen's tomb—have been infected with a deadly disease which has come from you know not where and which will bring about your destruction, be it sooner or later. My store of hackneyed phrases is inexhaustible. I felt the flow of conversation firmly in my hands, like the reins of an obedient mare: I pull at them and she stops, I shake them and she advances; I move them and she moves subject to my will, to left or to right."

"Two hours have passed without my being aware of them,' I said to her. 'I've not felt such happiness for a long time. And there's so much left for me to say to you and you to me. What would you say to having dinner together and continuing the conversation?"

"For a while she remained silent. I was not alarmed for I felt that satanic warmth under my diaphragm, and when I feel it I know that I am in full command of the situation. No, she would not say no. 'This is an extraordinary meeting,' she said. 'A man I don't know invites me out. It's not right, but—' She was silent. 'Yes, why not?' she then said. 'There's nothing to tell from your face you're a cannibal.'"

"You'll find I'm an aged crocodile who's lost its teeth,' I said to her, a wave of joy stirring in the roots of my heart. 'I wouldn't have the strength to eat you even if I wanted to.' I reckoned I was at least fifteen years her junior, for she was a woman in the region of forty, whose body—whatever the experiences she had undergone—time had treated kindly. The fine wrinkles on her forehead and at the corners of her mouth told one not that she had grown old, but that she had ripened.

"Only then did I ask her name."

"'Isabella Seymour,' she said.

"'I repeated it twice, rolling it round my tongue as though eating a pear.

"'And what's your name?'

"'I'm—Amin. Amin Hassan.'

"'I shall call you Hassan.'"

"With the grills and wine her features relaxed and there gushed forth—upon me—a love she felt for the whole world. I wasn't so much concerned with her love for the world, or for the cloud of sadness that crossed her face from time to time, as I was with the redness of her tongue when she laughed, the fullness of her lips and the secrets lurking in the abyss of her mouth. I pictured her obscenely naked as she said: 'Life is full of pain, yet we must be optimistic and face life with courage.'"

"Yes, I now know that in the rough wisdom that issues from the mouths of simple people lies our whole hope of salvation. A tree grows simply and your grandfather has lived and will die simply. That is the secret. You are right, my lady: courage and optimism. But until the meek inherit the earth, until the armies are disbanded, the lamb grazes in peace beside the wolf and the child plays water-polo in the river with the crocodile, until that time of happiness and love comes along, for one shall continue to express myself in this twisted manner. And when, puffing, I reach the mountain peak and implant the banner, collect my breath and rest—that, my lady, is an ecstasy greater to me than love, than happiness. Thus I mean you no harm, except to the extent that the sea is harmful when ships are wrecked against its rocks, and to the extent that the lightning is harmful when it rends a tree in two. This last idea converged in my mind on the tiny hairs on her right arm near to the wrist,
and I noticed that the hair on her arms was thicker than with most women, and this led my thoughts to other hair. It would certainly be as soft and abundant as cypress-grass on the banks of a stream. As though the thought had radiated from my mind to hers she sat up straight. 'Why do you look so sad?' she said.

'Do I look sad? On the contrary, I'm very happy.'

'The tender look came back into her eyes as she stretched out her hand and took hold of mine. 'Do you know that my mother's Spanish?' she said.

'That, then, explains everything. It explains our meeting by chance, our spontaneous mutual understanding as though we had got to know each other centuries ago. Doubtless one of my forefathers was a soldier in Tarik ibn Ziyad's army. Doubtless he met one of your ancestors as she gathered in the grapes from an orchard in Seville. Doubtless he fell in love with her at first sight and she with him. He lived with her for a time, then left her and went off to Africa. There he married again and I was one of his progeny in Africa, and you have come from his progeny in Spain.'

'These words, also the low lights and the wine, made her happy. She gave out throaty, gurgling laughs.

'What a devil you are!' she said.

'For a moment I imagined to myself the Arab soldiers' first meeting with Spain; like me at this instant sitting opposite Isabella Seymour, a southern thirst being dissipated in the mountain passes of history in the north. However, I seek not glory, for the likes of me do not seek glory.

'After a month of feverish desire I turned the key in the door with her at my side, a fertile Andalusia; after that I led her across the short passageway to the bedroom where the smell of burning sandalwood and incense assailed her, filling her lungs with a perfume she little knew was deadly. In those days, when the summit lay a mere arm's length away from me, I would be enveloped in a tragic calm. All the fever and throbbing of the heart, the strain of nerves, would be transformed into the calm of a surgeon as he opens up the patient's stomach. I knew that the short road along which we walked together to the bedroom was, for her, a road of light redolent with the aroma of magnanimity and devotion, but which to me was the last step before attaining the peak of selfishness. I waited by the edge of the bed, as though condensing that moment in my mind, and cast a cold eye at the pink curtains and large mirrors, the lights lurking in the corners of the room, then at the shapely bronze statue before me. When we were at the climax of the tragedy she cried out weakly, 'No. No.' This will be of no help to you now. The critical moment when it was in your power to refrain from taking the first step has been lost. I caught you unawares; at that time it was in your power to say 'No.' As for now the flood of events has swept you along, as it does every person, and you are no longer capable of doing anything. Were every person to know when to refrain from taking the first step many things would have been changed. Is the sun wicked when it turns the hearts of millions of human beings into sand-strewn deserts in which the throat of the nightingale is parched with thirst? Lingeringly I passed the palm of my hand over her neck and kissed her in the fountainheads of her sensitivity. With every touch, with every kiss, I felt a muscle in her body relax; her face glowed and her eyes sparkled with a sudden brightness. She gazed hard and long at me as though seeing me as a symbol rather than reality. I heard her saying to me in an imploring voice of surrender 'I love you,' and there answered her voice a weak cry from the depths of my consciousness calling on me to desist. But the summit was only a step away, after which I would recover my breath and rest. At the climax of our pain there passed through my head clouds of old, far-off memories, like a vapour rising up from a salt lake in the middle of the desert. She burst into agonized, consuming tears, while I gave myself up to a feverishly tense sleep.'