

“ ... and the  
birds of love  
perch over us.”

I kept them on the roof of the old house, in the loft; and on the balcony overlooking Ibn Zahr street in Ragheb Pasha; and in the bottom of my little bureau with the glass doors and the shelf on top.

There was the towering white one, blazing white, full-chested, which cooed deeply.

And the one whose translucent feathers were tinged with shimmering red and blue; long-billed, but silent, mute.

And the soft brown one - and the colour had a hot, African scent - which sang in a nasal monotone.

And the black speckled one, whose lacy collar was dappled with an ashen grey, almost white; which strutted, ponderous, coquettish, stout, to a slow tune.

And there was the spotted one the colour of salt, slightly-built, with a fine bill, whose long legs were rosy, and which hopped and sprang about, blown by the breeze.

And the one with legs embellished by a short down which whiffled in the wind.

And the thin, drawn one, with a wild bird's body; worn as if by a burning desire.

But the liquid of their eyes - all of them - was clear and deep, as of there were a pure rage within them.

Their small feathers flew around me, on the ground, among the books, beneath the couch, everywhere.

Their hard white droppings dried on the floor, on the oval marble table, on the shelf of the bureau and inside it, even

**EDWAR**  
**AL-KHARRAT**

*Dance of Passions*  
Translated from the  
Arabic by Frances Liardet

on the bed; and I collected them up and sold them cheap to the man who passed by in the street below, calling "Pigeon droppings!"

From the crack of dawn they started to wheel and fly around, striking the window-frames and the panes of the balcony before flying off, flapping their wings in freedom, returning in the blaze of noon to seek shelter with me. And they would quietly swim, without a sound, paining my heart, in the moonlit night skies.

They have flown away from me. Will they return? Will they return?

My search – even now – is fruitless.

After many long years I saw two white pigeons with a scattering of pale brown in their feathers, strutting around in a confident, masterful manner inside a poky little shop in as-Saliba Street. Chests puffed out, they pecked unhurriedly at the the floor of the shop. I noticed suddenly that this poor, queer little shop had a dirt floor, and that inside it there were blackened wooden shelves. They were mostly bare, but some of them held what looked like bric-a-brac, and there were also large tin cans, unopened and rusty, and empty beer and whisky and Coco-Cola bottles stacked in rows. Also second-hand school text-books, and jotters and notebooks, pencils and ball-point pens. Blown-up balloons, veiled with dust, and a round, flat bicycle wheel of the kind used in circuses and festivals - a single wheel, on its own, with broken spokes. Reels and skeins of black and white thread, sweets and toffees and sugared caraway-seeds in old-fashioned jars. Needles for cleaning Primus stoves, funnels, white rough-fibred loofahs, shaggy red sponges. Coloured cigarette cartons, stacks of Cleopatra and Rothmans side-by-side with empty packets of Hollywood and Coutarelle and Players. A few pieces of junk, tossed on the ground; house rubbish, tin dishes with holes in, dented pans, broken mirrors. Piles of old French and Arabic magazines, the garish covers now faded and torn. Cracked marble wash-basins which had been luxurious in far-off, magnificent days, now stripped of their taps and pipes, propped against the cluttered wall.

And the man in the long grey tunic, with the wispy grey beard, who was sitting on a small bathroom stool and making himself some tea in a round blue tin mug on a little spirit stove – the man had a calm, quiet look as he gazed out, lost in his own private horizon.

I saw the two pigeons come to his bare feet, fold their legs beneath their wings, trusting him completely, the feathers brushed smooth on their plump bodies.

I said 'Good Morning' to him and bought an edition of *The Thousand and One Nights*, an old one from the turn of the century which was missing a portion and had no cover. After the short statutory bargaining ritual, I gave him a pound. When he asked me if I wrote for the papers, and I replied 'Yes', he knocked off twenty piastres, as a gesture of goodwill from one man to another.

*I said: 'Where are the soaring doves of my passions?'*

The pigeon got up, swaying, quivering against our feet, and went out into the street to peck at some overripe tomatoes whose red skin, almost a blood-coloured maroon, had burst open to reveal soft flesh hanging with big white pips. They had been thrown away by the scaly trunk of an ancient, gnarled sant tree; it rose high above the old houses, built of planks and mud-brick, which teetered against each other. Between the overlapping wooden cross-beams, which were visible on the outside of the walls, the mud-brick had turned black. The sant tree embraced its sister-tree, springing from a wide deep pit in a patch of waste-ground by the shop; springing from the hollow left where the stones had been taken away. The debris still in the hollow had sunk and dried away into the soil; there were gently-sloping hillocks and earthy hollows which had hardened and dried, though the black clay was still neither completely dry nor completely wet. The roots of the twin trees sank into the ground, brawny, bulging, stripped bare, the wood appearing fresher and younger than the two trunks of this one, bisected tree; and the tressy branches, interwoven over the roofs of the tumble-down houses, layered one above the other, created a wide green shade.

*I said: Why does it enchant me, this single tree, cloven*

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AL-KHARRAT**

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*yet undivided!*

*I said: Is it because the heavenly doves dwell far-off in  
the branches of this twinned tree, in its bosom and its heights,  
perching in it with the crouch of death?*

*As for the white dove of earthly form, it has not taken  
the slightest notice of me...*

*I said: Love can bear everything.*

*I said: The hour of my destruction has come. My spirit  
welters in passion.*

I was by the sea at Camaenne, looking down from one  
of the large, luxurious balconies of the Hotel de France. On the  
marble table in front of me there was a tall Bloody Mary, the  
glass rimmed with a sting of hot pepper. The ocean breeze was  
blowing in on me from the Gulf of Guinea which lay beneath a  
low sky, laden with white clouds soon to disperse in the  
scorching heat...

The black rocks, with jutting edges and deep fissures,  
are tombstones tilted for ever by the convulsion of an ancient  
volcano; the rolling dunes are as white as soft, fine-ground  
flour, glinting with specks which shine like the points of  
needles; and the coconut palms are lofty, their leaves swinging  
under the weight of fruit protected and hidden in the heights.

The flat gulf is calm in the dazzle of the morning. The  
waves are as azure as if their surface is another twin sky,  
outspread beneath its sister, all the way to the horizon's rim,  
with hardly a sparkle.

The fishermen's nets are spread out on the low stone of  
the Corniche, washed and smelling of fish. They have keeled  
down beneath them, their bodies thin and wiry, the pleats of  
the black Alexandrian breeches gathered beneath the trunks of  
their thin legs; they mend the tears in the nets with long  
needles which flash as they rise and dip between the threads of  
the net.

*"The nets of my darling have tangled me up..."*

The small skiff rests, taut-staved on the sea shore, on  
the line dividing sand from water. At the tiller is the sapient  
ape divine, and his flesh is hard and firm.

Graceful female forms I see, in the light's reflection

corporeal, black; their bosoms are another fruit, a fruit with shining skin, turbid with thick, syrupy juice.

And the dark doves glide and slip along, almost on the surface of the sea.

Did the sailors go down with their broad daggers, and take them to a Spanish ship with a hull plated with gold – a ship lying low in the water, laden with the treasure of pirates of old?

What is it that floats behind the ancient fort, where at the foot the pure white sea-foam hardly froths?

I see it over the rim of the Bloody Mary, and I am certain that nothing is there.

Everything will be transformed, from one moment to the next, into the opposite of what it appears to be.

The magic skiff is a poor fishing-boat, brought to anchor by the fishermen after a long night's toil at the mercy of the waves. The girls of Anfushi and Bahri and Ras al-Tin crowd around it, and the fat ladies with black shawls draped over rounded shoulders, over nightgowns not completely clean; bare-armed and bare-throated, they have come for a cheap load of fish, a basketful, a anful of small-fry, of little fish, or a big basin of ivory-coloured prawns.

The enchanted ship is a sail hauled in the morning breeze, a single white dove's wing, soaring alone in the heaven of symbols; the heights of ardour, a passion which will leave no trace.

I await it, I dread it, I fear the end, the extinction; I stand with bated breath before the dénouement of a drama beyond my control; I do not know what may at any moment be brought forth. I feel a wild beating within me I do not know how to calm, and I do not want to assuage its terror.

And I know that all this is the companion of dereliction. That perdition, and ruin, are surely my lot.

Here I am in the heat of the bowels of the world; the world's full breasts give me suck of the hot, strong vintage; my accesses of desire are for this ample, fertile belly, these broad dark buttocks. And the true well-watered wine is neither visible nor tangible, springing only from this glut whose end I

reach through intoxication's frenzy; and yet it has neither end nor limit, not any pleasure known to me save that beyond it lies one fuller, more complete. Wastes of temptation and knowledge - I desist not from walking down their paths, and in them I fear no destruction. I held out my hands, and in their filling came at once the sweetness of passion and the gall of death. The beacon of my creed, without shame. The flit of the dove, gone before I arrive at anything. Its shadows have been cut by the horizon's sharp edge. Drunk from fullness, drunk from lack, drunk from attaining and seeking, from bliss and from the stab of deprivation, equally, without sobriety.

Why did I love you? Why?

Love's mainstay is meeting, not parting.

But I make no distinction, in my drunkenness, between the meeting of lovers and their turning-away, and there can be no awakening for me neither when you are near nor when you are far away; my passion does not abate at our meeting and our embrace - rather it overflows.

Whither can I flee? Where is my refuge?

*I said to myself: There can be nothing for you, from you. Nothing.*

We were crossing the Sultan Bridge. The street-lamps passed overhead, one after the other, shining on her lap inside her Volkswagen car, gleaming in a continual flicker over the flesh of her dark thighs. They were slightly parted, exciting my longing. The thin dress had ridden up a little. There was a packet of Peter Stuyvesant cigarettes in her lap, and a book of matches with the cover torn off.

I pick them up out of that soft hollow, a place barely moving as she concentrates on her driving; and I light one, blowing out the first lungful of smoke; and I pass her that cigarette, that cigarette barely moistened by the trace of the desire for a kiss now floating away from the round edge of it...

And when we crossed the bridge, the bushy trees at the head of the Nile sheltered sleepy white specks with folded wings.

The lights on the other shore twinkled beneath the palm trees which lay between the minaret and the lowly, near-forgotten little obelisk.

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And by the light of the stars she raised her round, golden-brown face to me, a polished mask, perfectly round, not a qualm flickering across it. The teardrops were falling from her wide, open eyes, each drop rounded and separate, gliding smoothly over the surface of her cheek to fall down to the birthplace of her breasts unconstrained inside the wide neck of her blouse. Without a sound, without a word. As if she were completely alone. And still she gripped the steering wheel of the Volkswagen, and drove mechanically.

She glanced at me for one moment; an incomparable look of love, and then the mask returned, blank, perfectly innocent.

I saw that my passions had black bodies, they danced around me bare-breasted; the wild music flared up and was smothered again; their limbs rose and plunged, the sails of their bodies hauled, spread out before the storm of desire, blown by gales, sleeping on the breath of gentle breezes.

They sprawl, then rise up to stand rigid in the debris of past dreams full of tears. The ground sinks beneath dancing feet, though the feet hardly touch the scorched fields, scattered with dry maize leaves...

They bend over the tombs of bygone pains, as if tenderly, and then they stand for a moment, tombstones in a vast, sweeping space; and then their stones tumble down.

Their black hair is thick; old days are immersed in it and brought back.

My passions have long wings which touch each other, layer one on the other, embrace one another; their flesh is succulent, strong, firm.

They turn now around me in a closed circle, their faces with negroid lips, their buttocks undulating with a keen quickness, eager, fleeting of transformations; and then it is a quiet delight, and the ripple of this delight is almost silent.

The birds of passion are anchored in the middle of the circle, perching, fixed, as heavy as a rock, as clear-eyed as water, entrails and aglow...

Then I found that the big leafy poinciana tree, which swamped the balcony of the house and submerged it in its

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spreading, encumbered boughs was on fire.

The fire is bright and shining, it hums, it warbles.

The fire is only at the edge of the tree, bursting into small round blazes which turn in on themselves.

I pour water on it with a red plastic bucket which I found on the shore in my other dream. I have called the fire brigade, but they have not come.

The little water I have splashes against the wall of the wall which is hot now from the fire. I can feel the flames ascending towards me. The water will not be enough to put it out, the fire is about to spread and engulf the rest of the tree and enter into me through the balcony and penetrate the interior of the house. What shall I do? What shall I do?

The whispering noise of the fire does not abate. It is strange that it is still contained in round balls which are blazing only around the ends of the branches; as if they are fiery tassels on long, frisking girls' braids. And the noise, the noise persists unabating, unfaltering - the noise alone is increasing, approaching, an unbearable alarm.

*I said: I accompany Sidi'l Junayd, and walk in his footsteps; indeed I have dwelt there for a while, and it is as if the heavens and the earth weep for my confusion and my love. The doves of my passion fly away from me. Now I have become as if I am burning from that absence in me. And here am I, now silent. I say nothing, yet, of the weeping or the burning; and there remains for me only the second death, the certainty of thirst.*

**Note**

Sidi'l Junayd – one of the earliest masters of Sufism, fl. C9th AD, was considered by some as a father of Sufism, by others as 'an infidel', known also as 'the peacock of learned men'.