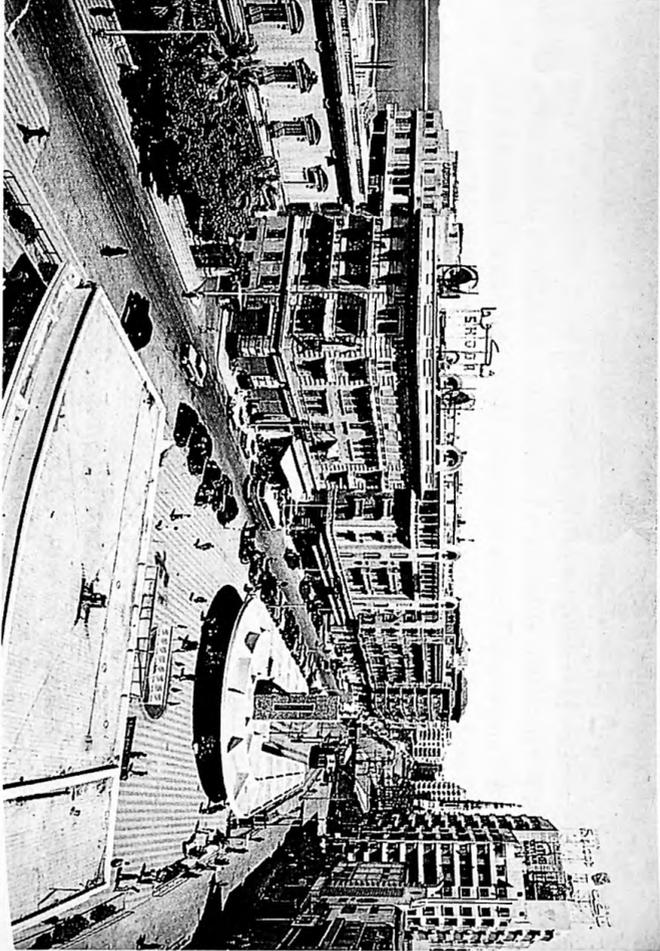


Photo courtesy of Alexandria Preservation Trust



Ramleh Station in the 1960s.

**MOHAMMAD
HAFEZ RAGAB**

*The Tale of a
Heartbroken Vendor*



Photo courtesy of Alexandria Preservation Trust

Ramlah Station in the 1940s.

**MOHAMMAD
HAFEZ RAGAB**

*The Tale of a
Heartbroken Vendor*
Translated from Arabic
by Hala Halim

Dedicated to Ramleh Station

Ramleh Station is in my head.

My head is wide, but Ramleh Station does not fill it – a deep abyss, freshly dug, carts on wheels laden with dust and pickaxes bearing men who slice the station's belly.

I stretched out my hand to scratch my scalp so a cart fell out and a labourer with a basket full of dirt on his shoulders also fell. As I bent down to help him, a truck got in through an opening in the back of my head and, without my being aware of it, they started loading it with dirt until it was all filled up. I only became conscious of them when they took up the digging again and their pickaxes fell on my head, uprooting my hair which started to drop out. I scratched my scalp once again and decided to file a complaint to the engineer supervising the operation. Going over to him, I found him shaking the dust off his shoes. Before I could warn him, the ceiling had toppled on his head and dust was falling on his clothes. I left him and bent down to try and sneak into my head through the hole of one of my eye sockets. I was now inside the station, walking around, looking for my old spot. My father had said to me one day: "You were born here. You came out of your mother's womb wanting to sell to customers

right away." I obeyed my father: I came out hawking. Since the day I was born I've been standing in this spot, removing my mouth from my mother's breast as soon as I saw a customer approach, selling to him, then nibbling again. But what an age I live in now. My father used to stand here and I stand here and the station is here – the station is in my head and my father is no longer around. He has left the station. And I am there, and the station is not there, and my place in the station is not there. I have come now to look for it. The labourers tell me that this happened at a certain time, they do not know whether past or yet to come. I wandered all through my head searching for my old spot but could not find it so I slipped out before anyone from the station could notice.

Walking along, I found the creditors gathered around El-Rashidi, the one-eyed newspaper vendor, clamouring for their money. I drew up to them and asked: "Which day of resurrection are we today?"

They said: "The eleventh day." I asked: "What is this man's offence?" They said: "He stole our money and hid it in his gutted eye. He won't give us our money back." But I know this man. It seems to me that I saw him once upon a time. As the labourers told me, this man was in the station with his back propped against the façade of Ala Keifak restaurant, selling *Confidence* and *Elle* which come from Paris. I used to look after his magazine stand on Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings when he went gambling at the Sporting Club. Back then, the station was there. Where has the station gone? It seems he stole and hid it in his gutted eye so the creditors would not see it.

I left him and went, left him astride a horse at the Sporting Club with all his money in the pit where I placed it at some other time until he gets back from the racing club and I hand it over. I have always hidden it for him until his return. But in his absence the engineer ordered the ground at the station to be dug up and a tunnel constructed speedily before El-Rashidi's return so he would lose his way and not find his magazines. Since that day, El-Rashidi has not come back from the club. He lost his way amid the crowded streets and the horses pierced his eyes, passed through them and trotted beside the Ramlah tram line, watching the passengers.

I have now found El-Rashidi, but not the station. To find the

station, I need to find his magazine stand, but the creditors will take him away, trailing him off to hell because he did not return their money. I looked at the vendors around me and, finding their eyes thrown in the dust, asked them: "Why have your eyes dropped out? What happened?" They said: "The pickaxes devoured our brains." While they went searching for them amid the rubble, the engineer caught them: "What are you doing?"

"We're looking for our brains."

He said: "Carry these stones and load them onto the trucks. There you'll find your brains."

The vendors set aside their newspapers and magazines, carried the big baskets and went around looking for their brains.

As for me, I have not yet carried a basket.

I'll be stubborn. I'll stand on my head and block the trucks' path. I'll say to the engineer: "Go find yourself another spot to dig. Why did you pick this place to dig a tunnel?"

He says: "For the ships to pass in the night and for fish to swim in its waters in the daytime."

I say: "I will not be a fish. I refuse to be a fish. I will persist in my stubbornness."

I brought my spread and laid it on the debris: roasted peanuts and watermelon seeds and chickpeas and almonds.

Ah!

How fast it went, how fast they responded to my call: rows of the dead emerged from amid the ruins. I was gladdened, overjoyed: "O, sirs! Will you profit a heartbroken vendor whose spot in Ramleh Station was robbed, whose wife, mother and aunts await his return."

The rows of the dead did not utter a word; they left me and passed. They emerged from a ditch and went into another, paying no attention to me. Finally, before the last ditch swallowed them, one turned and whispered in my ear:

"Come with us down below. There you'll find more customers than above."

I did not obey him; I refused to walk in a row and clung to my stubbornness. I shouted angrily at the stones: "I must meet the needs of all of my ten aunts."

They made no answer and ignored me.

Night fell.[...]

I looked around me and found Mohammad El-Qammash

**MOHAMMAD
HAFEZ RAGAB**

*The Tale of a
Heartbroken Vendor*

running towards me, panting. He said: "The dust suffocates me. The engineer has buried me alive."

I said: "Me, too."

With my hand I indicated to him a place that lies in a strange, distant time I have not yet found.

I said to him: "Look, the Ramleh tram is turning around the station."

He answered: "And under the trees Eid stands in the evening selling pistachio to the foreigners, the *khawagas*." [...]

Looking up at the smaller Ala Keifak restaurant which he could not see, I said: "I remember little Yorgho. See, he's stretching out his hand to me with an ice-cream cone. 'No, *merci*, Yorgho. I have no money right now. *Merci*, my friend.' Where has that time gone? We must find it immediately."

I took the cone from Yorgho and started nibbling it.

El-Qammash said: "And what of Moneim, our mate, the vendor of roasted seeds. You haven't mentioned him – he whose father is married to ten. From the very depth of the cold he calls out: 'Roasted peanuts. Fresca, wafers. Pistachio!' Now that they've dug out the tunnel, they found the bones of the ten women buried underneath the station. Fahmi, Moneim's father, stands atop the rubble, mourning them."

From where I stood I glanced up at the entrance to Cinema Strand: the hall was lit, the intermission approaching.[...] Girls and boys were getting out.[...] Hands gathered around me, fingers pierced me: Five piastres' worth of pistachio, please. I want pistachio for ten piastres. Give me roasted seeds for a piastre. My hand was inside the bag of peanuts. My second, fingerless, hand was in the pistachio bag. My third hand was in the bag of roasted seeds. Finally, I stretched out my second hand with a bag of peanuts to a girl who had come late: "Take it, before the film starts."

She stood silent and motionless, paying no attention to me. I put out my hand and touched her: she wasn't alive – a stone from the ruins. I said to her: "Take it from me, let me feel I'm still stretching out my hand to sell."

Night has fallen and I remain standing on my feet. My days at the station, it seems, are almost up. I'm still clinging to my stubbornness though the holes in my head keep widening and people are rushing through them to get away from the station.

I have not yet found a spot to stand in.

At last, I found a place where I stood from three to ten. My foot said: "Enough, I'm tired." I said: "Oh, shut up! He's not listening to you now, so stop talking to him."

I am now a lamppost. From the lamppost hangs a rubbish bin. In the bin are filthy things one week old which the sweeper hasn't yet taken away. There are insects now in the basket: beetles.

Out of sheer boredom, I started turning over the beetles, acquainting myself with them. One of them smiled to me. I smiled back. She said: "Do you fancy me?" I said: "I don't know." She said: "At night, when the engineers and labourers have gone, I'll leave the lid to the bin open for you. I know they annoy you and that you need someone to cheer you up." Then she went off with her companions.

I started observing the place once again. Amazing. There are creatures of an older species that walk in a line. How very strange!

In some other time I used to see such creatures walking around here, and how much smarter they were. Now they walk gloomily in a line. They don't draw near me because my wares are cold. I no longer buy coal to light a fire and put my fingers above it, roasting them to eat if I get hungry.[...]

The soles of the pedestrians on the dust that fills my mouth have caused me irremediable harm. One of them stepped on my wisdom tooth and broke it.

"Ouch!" I screamed. "My tooth, you broke my wisdom." *Khawaga* Basso, the proprietor of Ala Keifak restaurant, came out to me. Gazing into his eyes, I found before me the blueness of a troubled sea. "Why are you shrieking?" he said.

I answered: "They stepped on my wisdom tooth, *khawaga*."

He said grumpily: "Off with you! Away from the few remaining customers of the restaurant." [...]

It started raining. I looked first at the sky, then at the sea. I gestured to it: "Don't you feel like crying? Cry in my place. I don't like fish that cry. And the engineer said to me: 'If you walk through the tunnel you'll be a fish.'"

The sea said: "I don't have any tears left, either. I'll look for a steamship about to set sail to take me away from the bothers of this tunnel. The labourers with their pickaxes and blows have

**MOHAMMAD
HAFEZ RAGAB**

*The Tale of a
Heartbroken Vendor*

disturbed me."

"It's all your fault. If only you'd drowned them."

The sea said: "They'd have forestalled me, burying me beneath all those stones. Excuse me, I'll catch up with that ship" [...]

I do not know how long has passed while I've been here. I still do not know what age this is. O, night, tears no longer avail. At six I cried. They had removed the iron fence and replaced it with a wooden one, encircling the abyss to hide it from the sorrowful eyes. I kept telling myself: You must remain, so the engineer won't gloat.

At six, the apocalypse began. People rushed in my direction – creatures of the past. So astonished was I to see them that

I dropped dead, and they passed over my body uncaringly.

Today is Sunday. All the weird creatures of the city have gathered in the station. The path to eternity cuts across my pavement where my corpse has been lying for years, finding no one to bury it.

The creatures are sticky, exuding the odor of sweat and forgetfulness. They walk in a straight line, on a hair from a woman who has had a lot of cognac to drink at Ala Keifak. She has plucked out the hair and tied one end of it to a lamppost, the other to the neck of the mad engineer. She has taken off all her clothes and started singing. Meanwhile, the weird creatures pass before me while I stand in the middle crying:

"Peanuts. O, fresca. Roasted seeds. Pistachio."

The weird creatures to my right shout: "Hey, mate. Shove off."

Meanwhile, I chant: "Grant us your mercy and benedictions, on this day which is a Sunday, as you tread on the path to eternity, for you may fall. Profit a brother in humanity – bestow on him a piastre or two. Peanuts. Fresca. Roasted seeds!"

A man yells: "Take your belongings and leave."

"I'll pray that you fall into the abyss." [...]

Tonight, as I stood by the rubbish bin chatting with a scorpion that peaked out of a slit in the wooden wall overlooking the abyss to watch the labourers, the governor of the Missala Police Station came by. The governor cast a glance at me then turned to the soldiers behind him: "Remove him, him and his

scorpion and rats."

I leapt off the wall and fell to kiss his hand: "O, glorious governor of the Missala Police Station, I am a poor man and have come to beg the people of Missala for a few piastres."

He answered cruelly: "Take your spread and go away."

Once again I bent forward onto his hand, then sank my teeth into its flesh: "O, sir, glorious governor, my place is here, here it was that my mother bore me from her womb. I wouldn't know where to go. You go and leave me here."

He yelled in my face: "Woe be to you, beetle. You dare bite me? Guards, catch him!" And they caught him.

They took me to the headquarters of the governor, throwing me in a police van. I am now heartbroken.

*Born in 1935, Mohamed Hafez Ragab finished grade school while working with his father, a newspaper vendor in Ramleh Station. Drawing on influences as diverse as puppet theatre, Russian literature, and modern film, Ragab started writing in the late fifties. Since then, he has published six short story collections. In 1957, he was offered a post in the Supreme Council of Arts and Literature at the Ministry of Culture in Cairo. Marginalised by the Cairene literary establishment for his experimental writing, he moved back to Alexandria in 1964, where he held a series of clerical posts, first at the Governate of Alexandria, and then at the Graeco-Roman Museum from which he retired in 1995. This short story was originally published in Ragab's 1968 collection *The Football and the Man's Head*. Hala Halim's 1992 M.A. thesis was on the feminisation of Alexandria in literature; she currently works on the Culture and Profile pages of al-Ahram Weekly.*