

For many long years Abdallah

hadn't return to the medina. That space was no longer his, he thought. He in fact had spent a large part of his life there, but that was ancient history, stagnant water into which he had no desire to plunge again. His only tie to the medina was his grandfather's house, perhaps in ruins after a period of tenancy. There had always been the question of selling it; but the many heirs could not agree, hesitating and equivocating, and when finally the group came to a decision, an unforeseen conflict surfaced, and it was necessary to begin again and wait. Nevertheless, one day, everyone agreed to sell. Then Abdallah entered the medina, not by the main gate, but by a small one located not far from a parking lot where he could leave his car.

As soon as he had gone a few steps, he felt that the gate had closed behind him. Protected by its walls, the medina is a closed territory. Once, you turn your back on the outside world –looking back won't help; it's disappeared, lost. A strange unease gripped Abdallah: he recognised no one, but the medina had not changed at all. Well, yes: the streets seemed narrower, the houses less lofty, distances shorter. This shrunken space, as far as he could see, opened up on to a jumble of lanes and dead-ends whose names he didn't know. Next to stately doors, there were others –squat, tiny– which seemed created for dwarfs.

What was supposed to happen, happened. Abdallah got lost. He, the medina's child, could no longer find his way back in what seemed to him an endless labyrinth in which he might wander forever. He became aware that entire sections of the medina were foreign to him, that for years on end he had never gone beyond the boundaries of his quarter, shopping at the same grocer, carrying bread to the same ovens, going to the same baths, and attending the same Quranic school. Panic-stricken, he was about to ask directions from a passerby when he saw a familiar door. He was sure of it: it was the house of his Aunt Saadia.

Saadia: the Blissful. During holidays, Abdallah would accompany his grandfather, who, rapping the ground with his cane, was on his way to visit his three daughters. His first visit was to Rabia (Spring) who lived the furthest away. Did she deserve this privilege because she had the most children? Then came the turn of Zohra (Flower), a brief visit: he profoundly despised her husband. He would end in beauty with Saadia, the eldest, who was dear to his heart; and dear, as well, to Abdallah's heart. She distinguished herself from her two sisters by serving two kinds of cake, and –the height of refinement– by offering not tea, but milk.

Because Abdallah was classically educated, he was besieged by romantic reminiscences. Whether he liked it or not, he was heir to that ancient Arab poet who, bent over the remains of an abandoned camp in the open desert, follows memory's thread, revivifying the shattered past.

A small square, a public fountain. Abdallah avoided the street where M. used to live. Each morning, M. would leave home and head slowly to the fountain to perform a rather strange sacrifice. Simply dressed in baggy trousers and white vest, he carried a trap filled with three or four scampering rats. Opening the tap, he immersed the rat-trap in the fountain. While waiting for the rats to die, he would chat calmly with the Berber grocer. He lived alone in a huge house. Alone? An army of rats kept him company, his sole occupation being this warfare. One very hot night, he dreamed that he had a fever and that his mother was sponging his face with a damp cloth, while moving a pair of scissors close to his eyes. He was frightened and woke up. He was covered in sweat; a small, quick tongue was licking his forehead. If he moved his head, the rat would surely bite him. He remained immobile for a moment, then lifted a leg and let it fall back on the mattress, thereby provoking the rat's flight. The morning after that horrible night, M. purchased a rat-trap. One morning, he didn't reappear. The grocer worried about him and went to knock on his door. Receiving no response, he informed his brother, who lived at the other end of the medina. When at last they entered the house, they saw that the rats had already begun to gnaw the door to the room where M.'s corpse lay. In the courtyard, the rat-trap was empty. No longer required to pay their daily tribute to M., the rats were able to prosper, at ease in the vast house in which no one any longer disputed their ownership. Instinctively, a passerby would move away from the door, imagining the horrors that must have taken place inside: a relentless swarm, infection, scenes of orgy and of carnage.

Not far from this nightmarish house, Habiba had his sphere of influence –a few hundred square meters. Contrary to what his name

—"Beloved Woman"—suggested, Habiba was a tom-cat, and his extraordinary exploits earned the children's respect. Each morning, at precisely ten o'clock, he would leave R.'s house and begin slowly inspecting his territory, making sure that all was well. Then he would settle down near the sewer opening, no longer moving. In order not to disturb him, we would stand at some distance and hold our breath. Suddenly, he would thrust a left paw and pull out a squirming rat which soon stopped moving. Killing was not enough for Habiba; beyond that he needed to exhibit his prey, proclaim his triumph, receive our acclaim. Satisfied, he would begin stalking again until half past noon, his meal time. Then he would scamper home; and we would escort him to witness an even more astonishing spectacle. As it happened, he did not miaow, he did not scratch at the door to have it opened for him. Taking off, he would spring into the air and raise the door-knocker, which would fall back with a crash. At once R.'s wife, always laying in ambush behind the door, would open it and welcome him with words of love. Surefootedly, he would head straight for the kitchen.

During the mating season, he would disappear for days, for weeks at a time, and everyone would miss him. Rats would brazenly show themselves in the streets and steel into houses. It always fell to women, in the midst of their housework, to come face-to-face with a rat who would gaze at them with passionate eyes. With a cry, they'd rush headlong from the kitchen, their kingdom, to hide in the room where the man of the house was peaceably settled. He would receive the news with the dread of a passenger aboard a galleon, upon seeing a black pirate flag on the horizon.

The man would begin by blaming his wife. If she had kept watch, as he never ceased to advise her, made sure that the front door to the house always remained closed, such confrontations would not have occurred. But he knew he must act and as soon as possible. His authority was at stake: either he killed the invader or risked both the contempt of his wife and children and becoming the laughing-stock of the neighbourhood. Overcoming his aversion, he would rise, grab a stick, and bravely enter the kitchen, that dark, feminine, alien space where he practically never set foot. With one end of his stick, he would search the corners and all possible hiding places. Finally, the rat would appear; a homeric battle would then ensue among the gas-cookers, pots, cauldrons, and dishes. The man would understand that he must smash the enemy's head, and he would devote the time necessary to achieve this. At last, under the admiring glances of his children, he would leave the kitchen, exhausted, hands trembling, face distorted as if a tooth had been extracted without anesthesia. A laughable victory, yet during the entire combat, he had the impression of fighting—not

against a common rodent— but against an emissary from a parallel, unnameable world, against the cunning emissary of devilish, satanic forces. After all, in a burlesque parody of the *Iliad* with the long, and unpronounceable title, the *Batrachomyomachy*, Homer had not looked down on describing the war between the frogs and the rats.

While wandering in the garden of his memories, Abdallah ended up in front of his childhood home. As soon as he crossed the threshold, he felt that same unease that had gripped him when he entered the medina. Even traditional houses refuse all communication other than with the sky that hangs over the courtyard. As soon as the door shuts, you cut your ties to the outside; when you return home, it is to yourself, to an intimacy with one's deep self that has little in common with the prodigal being displayed in the streets. In the absence of windows, it is necessary to climb up a ladder to the terrace in order to see as far as the eye can gaze: other terraces—each one as white as the next— and somewhere, a fragment of the sea.

The house, though in memory vast, seemed quite small to him. Very quickly he went round it while waiting for the arrival of his cousins who certainly would be accompanied by their sons and grandsons, an entire tribe whose members he only set eyes on now and then at funerals: death, far from separating, reunited. He was in the house of the dead and it seemed to him that ghosts of disappeared dear ones formed a circle around him and directed towards their last request; he blamed himself for not having visited their graves for many years. He also blamed himself for failing to maintain his grandfather's books, countless books that, just after his death, were packed in wooden chests and locked up near the terrace in a side room that held sacks of wheat, jars of oil, honey and butter. They were oversized volumes, each one containing in the margins another text of his commentary on a related subject. Books with crowded lettering, without paragraphs, indentations or punctuation. Labyrinthian books which you would enter at the beginning and from which you would only emerge after quite breathlessly going through millions of letters.

The library of Abdelmalek certainly was composed mainly of commentaries on the Quran, compilations of prophetic traditions, treatises on theology and jurisprudence. He had loved to repeat that Abdallah would become an alim, a scholar versed in the sciences of religion. In this way, he hoped to endure, to live on in his grandson (perhaps he also wished deep in his heart a total incarnation—that the frail child accompanying him to the mosque had been named Abdelmalek). In his eyes, only religious Law deserved a life consecrated to it, and only those books that illuminated the meaning of the divine Word were worthy of being read. At the end of his life, he read only

the Quran. His library did not contain a single book on literature; poetry, "artistic prose" held no attraction for him; they had no use for the believer in this world or the next. Of course, he knew that in the past there were great poets: Abu Nuwas, Buhturi, Mutanabbi, but none of them represented a model to follow. Weren't they, after all, drunkards, perverts, unbelievers, beggars, marginal people? The few poems that he knew (which he had recopied by his own hand) glorified God and the Prophet; these poems were weak works of art, without charm, but the humble tone of a writer, a poor creature trying to seduce the Creator, was moving. Composing and reciting these verses are a form of prayer, an act of piety, a renewal of faith. How had he come to this aversion, or indifference to poetry? Which master had turned him away? To begin with, there is the Quranic curse: "It is the poets who men astray follow in turn. Do you not see that they follow all paths as if they were insane? That they say they do not do?" Nonetheless, the Quran excludes from censure the poets "who believe, who practise good, and endlessly repeat the name of God." Yet, were they able to forge to make poetry, good poetry? An eighth century philologist, Asma'i, said that poetry loses its force when it strays from its essence, which resides in the *batil*, that is to say the lie and the imposture. A horrible word, yet never contradicted: poetry theorists of all schools held little esteem for poetry based on virtuous feelings. The great Arab poets were monsters.

For Abdelmalek, all the poetry of the world was contained in the flower-bed he carved out at the bottom of the courtyard where he cultivated roses. Evenings, he would sit facing them and muse gloomily on their transience, the ephemeral character of all life, and the vanity of the world. Perhaps the future abode offered itself as a vast rose-garden where he could move about unconcernedly, stopping from time to time to straighten a flower or uproot weeds (assuming there were any in paradise).

It was a calamity if anyone dared to come near the flower-bed. Um Hani made sure to guard it with unfailing vigilance, because she dreaded her husband's rare but terrible wrath. But the devil sometimes whispered to one of the grandsons to cut a rose. A great moment of panic would follow: she would run about searching for her glasses (which no oculist had prescribed), put them on, and then with needle and thread, she would re sew the rose and, thereby, repair paradise.

ABDELFATTAH KILITO, born in 1945, is Professor of French Litterature at Rabat University. He has published novels, essays and articles, in Arabic and in French, including: *Littérature et étrangeté*, *L'absent* and *La langue d'Adam*. He received the Médaille de Vermeil de l'Académie française in 1996.