

TRANSLATED
FROM THE SPANISH BY
PETER BUSH

I'm a woman into magical realism, an avid reader

of Garcia Marquez, the Allende gal and the high-flying disciples. I'm just wild about novels and stories seething with colourful characters and awesome incident: sage grannies, clouds raining blood, children on the wing, galleons mysteriously beached in lush virgin jungle. These "*romans de pays chauds*", as a defender of anaemic, worn-out literary notions dubbed them, bring a new sap and vitality, a pinch of poetry into the prosaic confines of our lives. Consequently, when I heard my esteemed co-reader in the Circle tell the story of The Thousand Nights Less One, which referred to the stork's nest near Eusebio's little place in the Casbah, next to the *mechouar*, I recalled my compatriot Ali Bey's paragraphs on these long-shanked migrants whose company he enjoyed in Marrakesh thanks to a credulous sultan.

According to an old Moroccan tradition, Berber peasants think of storks as human beings who, in order to travel and see the world, temporarily adopt their birdly shape and who resume their original form on returning home. Thus, when I reached Marrakesh in pursuit of the elusive Eusebio, I decided to renounce my risky, fruitless investigations and, thanks to the gracious help of the historian Hamid Triki, I headed toward the ancient hospice for storks adjacent to the mosque of Ben Youssef.

After much enquiring and promenading I came across Dar Belarkh and its keeper. Encouraged by my generous tip, he produced a bunch of keys and led me through a side-door, along a gloomy porch, to a huge and magnificent yet filthy and abandoned courtyard. All manner of rubble and rubbish covered the central space, blessed with a fountain, beautiful arcades, mouldings in side-rooms, friezes

of tiles firmly resisting the passage of time. There were infinite messes of pigeon feathers and droppings, even a fresh corpse of a member of the species, attracted like its *confrères*, by the benign silence of the place. The hospice had been closed a century earlier, upon the death of one of its founder's grandsons.

I mentioned the myth of the stork-men to my companion. To my great surprise, he corrected my characterisation. It was no myth, it was the unsullied truth. He himself had a neighbour who migrated to Europe and returned home a few months later, after recovering his normal shape. He lived right up that alley and, without more ado, I was introduced to him.

The metamorphoser —what better nomer?— was a calm, peaceful old man, similar in looks to Eusebio, with intense blue eyes and an immaculate white beard, seated in the doorway to his house, his right hand perched on the top of his walking-stick. To avoid vexatious preambles, I'll give you his story straight, be it genuine or not, fruit of an invention of his own harvesting, or borrowed from folklore.

"Forty odd years ago, my wife —may God preserve her in her glory— got a permit to work in a French textile factory and emigrated in order to increase our modest income, leaving me in charge of the children. To begin with, she sent news like clockwork together with a giro payment representing her monthly savings; but gradually the money turned to a trickle, without any conforming missive. Such a strange, lengthy silence, raising apprehension and troubling questions, plunged me into deep melancholy. My letters went unanswered; my request for telephonic communication likewise. I asked after her *via* a neighbour, also contracted by a textile firm in the same region. Her laconic telegram —"well and working"— not only was not soothing, it stoked my unease. If she was well, why so silent? Had she forgotten she was a wife and mother of four? At night, I tossed and turned restlessly in bed. In the meantime, the possibilities of getting a passport had shrunk: the crisis and unemployment in Christian lands closed doors on foreigners and the French Consulate would not grant a visa to an artisan like myself, a humble cobbler. They demanded bank statements and goodness knows what else. In a word: I had to give up. But I dreamt and dreamt ever more vividly of making the journey. And one day, while gazing at the storks nesting on the battlements of the royal palace, I said in my heart of hearts, if only I was like them and could fly to where my wife is working, to the distant sweatshop in Epinal. As if fired by a premonition, I went to see my eldest brother. I told him I'd decided to go to Europe and handed my children over to him for their temporary care and education. That anxious phase of my life was abruptly at an end.

"The following day, I was aloft with a flock of storks in an ineffable state of bliss and delight. The world was at once miniature and immense: toy towns and landscapes, seas gleaming like mirrors, white mountains... My altitude, lightness and speed of movement granted me a feeling of superiority over humans, slow as turtles, tiny like insects. Intoxicated by our gliding in precise, purposeful formation, I flew joyfully towards the prosperous, enlightened continent whence the Christians had come, apparently, to educate us and offer us work while they were about it. These were weeks of freedom and pleasure, beyond frontiers and the stamping of travel documents. Without any papers we crossed compartmentalised territories, transgressed their mean-spirited laws, avoided customs and police controls, mocked the distribution of visas. Once over a great chain of mountains, snow-covered like the Atlas, the panorama changed: the fields were greener, the woods denser and more frequent, ochre-tiled villages gave way to grey-slate roofs. We followed a river valley, its sides lined with factories and cities. A few days later, after long days of flight and nightly stops on towers and belfries, I felt my energy waning, fell out of rhythm with my companions, fell irrevocably behind, flapped my wings with difficulty. Unable even to hover, I plummeted and landed in a garden as best I could.

"My appearance surprised the owner of the house, a Frenchman in his forties, who was pruning shrubs and tidying up the lawn with his shears. 'Look, darling Aisha, it's a stork,' he shouted. My beloved wife's name made my heart miss a beat. Who was that fellow and how dare he be so familiar? When she peeped out of the backdoor I almost fainted. I stared at her till my eyes were awash with tears. 'How incredible,' she said in the Frankish tongue, 'There are lots of them in my country. I'm sure that's where she's from.' She walked over, didn't recognize me, gently caressed my plumage. 'How tame! She must have fallen ill and can't fly anymore. I'll look after her and feed her on raw fish. In our country they say it brings luck: a guest sent from heaven, whom we must respect and offer hospitality to.'

"Aisha's tender, welcoming words deepened, did not soften my grief. Her use of *we* and her friendly attitude towards the individual confirmed my suspicions: she was his concubine, shared his bed and table. Bewildered and bitter, I wondered whether they had children. I was afraid I'd hear a baby's cry and inspected the washing basket and fortunately saw neither nappies nor infant clothing. But the previous feeling of superiority and pride that had possessed me in the ether transmuted into impotent rage. Two steps away from my wife and her lover, with my clumsy shanks and grating croaks, I was unable to react against her adultery. Aisha's maternally tender affections, the zeal with which she cared for me, chose my food, built a kind nest on the roof

of the garden-shed, diminished rather than enhanced my temporary birdly state. My appearance reminded her of her country, she showered me with caresses and treats, but at dusk, when they both returned from work —she from her sweat-shop, he from the branch of a big bank—, they shut themselves in their house and left me one-legged on my nest.

"After the first melancholy weeks, my spirits began to rise: I decided to take the offensive. I abandoned my nest of misfortune and without a by-your-leave slipped into the house. At first, the intruder tried to chase me out, but she stopped him.

— This stork's a blessed creature who reminds me of all I left behind. If she wants to live inside, she will. God sent her to us and her wishes will be met.

The guy oozed bad-temper:

— This is all very poetic, but who'll clean the shit up?

— I will! Haven't I told you a thousand times it's a sacred animal? Although he snorted something scornful about India and her cows, she shrugged her shoulders and imposed her will: henceforth, if I felt like it, I'd live with them night and day.

"The new situation created by my wife's energy and determination favoured my plans of revenge. I took advantage of both their absences during work-hours and sniffed around the furniture and nooks and crannies of the house: I could see for myself how Aïsha kept photos of her childern like gold bars, put her entire wages in a savings account, and regularly sent home part by postal order. The intruder paid for everything, the shopping, my fish and leeches, the gas and electricity bills. Such signs of provision for our future, added to the attention she paid me, strengthened my resolve: I did more of the business on the guy's personal items and clothes, made myself comfortable in his bed. As I dallied there, the domestic rows and squabbles got worse.

— You're not going to let her dirty the sheets?

— If she soils the sheets, I'll wash them. The poor girly (she always referred to me in the feminine), after such a long journey and then falling ill, feels at home here, is part of the family.

"I pretended to yield to the intruder's irritation, nobly left the terrain, waited till he put out the light and he began to stir and stroke her before I swooped on the bed and soiled it. Immediately he switched on the bed-side light.

— That's enough playing around! I'll deal with her now! Enough is enough!

— You so much as touch one feather and you'll be sorry! You just listen to me: I'm fed up with your disgusting fiddling. Let me sleep in peace!

— If you want to sleep, sleep; but not with her. I've told you a thousand times I can't stand the bird!

— Well, if you can't stand her, clear off to the sofa! Personally, I don't intend to separate from her!

— Anyone would think she was your husband! Ever since she came, you've been behaving like a loony. These manias and witches' tales come from your country, not from any modern, civilised nation!

— Hey, my country is better than yours. This stork's mine and, if you don't like her, I'm off and Happy Christmas.

"From that night on there were daily quarrels. I wanted to sleep in my bed, next to my wife, and the intruder conceded and migrated to the sofa. I felt Aïsha preferred me and was thinking about me. Sometimes she sat at the kitchen table and wrote letters home, to the address next to the hospice for storks founded centuries ago. She cohabited with the Nazarene like a dog with a cat. When she went out I flew to the shed awning and perched on the nest. I was afraid the intruder would slice my head off with a knife or club me to death. I was comforted by my victory and began to recover a taste for flight. One day, after devouring my ration of fish, I bid a silent farewell to Aïsha, looked out for my flock overhead, flew up and headed back to Marrakesh.

"I recovered my human form as soon as I arrived. I turned up home as if I'd just left and hugged my children. My brother had diligently looked after them, they'd been to school and, when they saw me, they danced with joy. Underneath the clock in my bedroom was a pile of letters from Aïsha. They spoke of the stork's visit, of how she missed her country. She was still working in the textile factory to meet her savings target and to be able to buy a shop on her return. When she returned two years later, she beamed radiantly and arrived loaded with presents. I forgave her, of course, I forgave her: I forgot her infidelity and lived happily with her till God wanted her at His side and she was buried in Bab D'ukkala.

"I never told her or anybody else of the truth about my visit, except for my neighbour and a gentleman of European origin whose friend from the Rif died in a traffic accident and who had lived ever since away from the world, writing verse and seeking solace every afternoon in the mosque Ben Youssef. His name was Eusebio.

"I remember he listened very carefully and then wrote down word for word the very same story I've just told you."

JUAN GOYTISOLO, born in Barcelona, lives in Marrakesh.

He is one of Spain's most illustrious writers.

The text above is an excerpt from his novel, *Las Semanas del Jardín*, Alfaguara, 1997.

