

Rabat 24/1/75

Dear Choukri

Since we parted, I've been thinking about writing to you, but writing to friends isn't easy, as it's also writing in the "absolute" sense of the word, with all that this requires of pregnancy, labour pains and giving birth – and that's exactly where my problem lies: I write a lot of things in my mind or just before I go to sleep, all in a rush, without complete phrases, or else with phrases densely packed together, expressing the feeling, or the twists and turns of the idea, in an amorphous lump. Day after day, plans to write slowly grow, but something postpones them, hides them away in your memory, or keeps them suspended on your fingertips – and I don't think there's anything harder than being in this state: the overpowering desire to write followed by the block, real or imagined. We become different people, or different from how we want to be through writing. Having a split personality when we're so used to expressing ourselves (as an integral part of being aware and having an understanding of what's going on) gives us this feeling that our lives are absurd and not worth living. This doesn't mean that life is, by definition, proof against nihilism, but for those who write or paint, the inability to pursue their talent for expression, as an alternative illusion of explaining and enriching, makes life even more impossible – and however much we resort to drink, or the drug of women, the feeling of angst will remain with us.

The solution is simple (theoretically): all we have to do is write regularly, except this is harder than we imagine: our surroundings, the lack of order in our lives and the lives of those around us, make us prisoners of this mist of confusion. What we really need is to announce a state of emergency so we can shut ourselves away and write until we've drained what's inside us to the last drop, then we can go back to practising our art and being witnesses to what's going on around us!

The artist can't be cut off from a basic part of his being, otherwise he condemns himself to the misery of feeling at odds with the world, because it all depends, as Nietzsche said, on "becoming who you are".

You've probably gathered from the above that I only write rarely, and this is at the root of my unhappiness. I'm overwhelmed with meetings and preparing classes, and fleeting or impossible relationships, and when I think about my literary projects, despair gets

the better of me, because a whole host of circumstances makes me so far from achieving my dreams. Yet I never tire, every night just before I go to sleep and after I've switched off the light, of recalling things which come to me when I'm warm and cosy in a cold hollow world.

Dear Choukri, I always remember Tangier and you, and wish I had time to visit you all, for your city gives one the illusion that one's free and has no restrictions. I hope by now you will have organised yourself to write, as you promised, and that you'll make your *motto* for the coming year: writing against platitudes, madness, violence and contemptible hangers-on and parasites. Ultimately, writing grants us a special kind of victory over all the aspects of our society and our world that we reject.

Give my best wishes to your friend, the Spanish poet Julio, and to the beautiful night life of Tangier.

P.S. Why don't you send us four copies of your autobiography so that we can include it with the other work you're giving us to consider for publication? The Fez branch aren't allowed by law to publish printed material. I've consulted them about that.

Hoping to see you, or hear you, or read you.

Affectionate greetings,

Mohamed Berrada

Rabat 19/2/77

Dear Choukri

The situations I talked to you about aren't unfamiliar to me. I suffer constantly from a sense that there's no continuity in my life, and from a lack of that particular warmth which transforms life into a collection of distinctive moments, dispelling the feelings of triviality and randomness and nihilism. The rational explanation for this phenomenon and others like it is probably not of much use: that we are a generation being destroyed from within, chasing after values and ideas and alternatives which repeatedly slip through our fingers and leave the way clear for heavy layers of absurdity and monotony to accumulate, together with the sense that nothing has any meaning.

But I believe that the prescient awareness we have of our position as intellectuals, detached from other people, deprived of a suitable environment in which to take risks and realise our projects with their many different angles and perspectives, is what forces us into the labyrinths of rebellion and folly. I often say to myself, "Our tragedy is that we're like bullets which haven't been fired and remain trapped in the gun barrel, being eaten away by rust."

Added to that is the general repression which characterises relationships in our society and makes human beings into puppets, screws, skeletons, and beetles which get crushed underfoot. I experience moments which make me shake with annoyance and anger and despair because we live a life different from the life we want, a life full of holes, with our eyes and mouths shut, and at best we beat our fists and heads against the wall and lick our wounds and sip our drinks and bury our dreams, and continue on our way, drawn by a thread we can hardly see and the nature of which we don't understand.

This isn't exactly an accurate picture, as in many instances we somehow grasp intuitively what life is and what we want out of it, and which path in life we're going to choose. But all of a sudden, in the course of the journey, barriers go up and things become unclear. The question becomes who or what will give existence, society, people back their innocence or their meaning? Here we're obviously looking at a problem which has been around since Aristotle tried to formulate it as he searched for ways for us to conceptualise existence and being (first causes, etc.) - the vast world of metaphysics, which we can't ignore or put in parentheses, even when we give a materialist, polemical answer in this way.

I read some wonderful pages in a short book in translation by the modern German philosopher Heidegger. It's called *What is Philosophy? What is Metaphysics? Holderlin and the Essence of Poetry*. I picked this sentence out of it: "The profound restlessness which looks down from above like a silent summer cloud into the depths of people's souls, moving between people and objects and you with a strange impartiality, this restlessness reveals Being in its entirety."

It's true, this stubborn repetition always to go back and look for the meaning of things in the banal and mundane and monumental, and in brief moments of idleness or fulfilment, is what gives the game of life its magic and attraction, like the undulating ground gives Tangier its beauty, demonstrated in its power to surprise you with something hidden between the highs and the lows.

I want to talk to you about a lot of things, even if it's in a rush like this, because writing letters is at least some sort of compensation for being unable to write literature, especially when we write to someone whom we know will understand what lies behind our words.

I remember S.'s innocence. I won't pretend that I'm not completely disarmed by innocence, but the profound difference between our personalities makes it impossible for us to sustain a relationship. I also have a certain degree of innocence, but I'm inwardly torn, and my concept of the love/sex relationship bears the marks of my childhood, of travel abroad, loneliness and suffering

—and that feeling of spontaneity I was aware of all of a sudden, face to face with a black body, and the “night” becomes a permanent, absolute symbol, as in the way Abu'l-Ala al-Ma'arri portrays it:

A night may be as beautiful as the dawn

Even if it's as black as a shawl

The two ran off in the night to seek their pleasure

While the stars stood by in amazement

How often we wanted to praise those days

But were too busy criticising the present

It's as if I never said when the moon was a child

And the night in the prime of its youth

This night of mine is my African bride

With strings of pearls around her neck

The flight of sleep from my eyelids with her

Is like the flight of the past from the coward's heart

I'm becoming increasingly convinced that writing and artistic expression generally are a means of understanding the world and people, and that they fulfil some need, however satisfied we may be with our lot. And here we come back to the tangible reality, because writing in a society like ours isn't an easy, comfortable activity, generally approved of. We have to struggle for the right to write and be published, and at the same time we dream that everything in our society will change (from the top to the President of the Moroccan Writers' Union!).

Dear Choukri, don't forget to send me the manuscript of your novel, and I'll do all I can to get it published so that people can read it. And send us another piece for the second issue of *Afaq*. The first will be released in a week.

The conference of Arab writers will be held in Tripoli at the end of March. Perhaps you'll be lucky, and the branch will choose you as a delegate. But this is premature. We'll see what happens.

Write when you can, even when you're sitting in the *café* and notice a pretty black woman who makes you think of an African wedding.

Affectionate greetings and kisses to you,

Mohamed Berrada

Hospital for Psychiatric Illnesses
(New Wing), Majorca, Tetouan.

18-12-77

My dear Mohamed Berrada

This is my twelfth day in the hospital. At the moment I'm in the Nipon Café and I'm writing to you from there. It's half past eleven

in the morning. I don't know anyone sitting in this historic old *café*.

In the hospital I walk about some of the time, and other times I sit with one of the more intelligent patients and he tells me about his life's tragedies. It's impossible in this place to hear happy memories, and even if there are some, they're mixed with sorrow. Are there such things as purely happy memories? I'm starting to be invaded by the feeling that I have to write in this mental asylum. When I leave here, I'll try to change my life.

In Tetouan I don't feel tempted to do anything apart from staying in the hospital or sitting here, drinking coffee. What an obedient language Arabic is! Make whatever mistakes you want, and you'll find a justification for them in Arabic grammar. I came here at about half past ten. This has more or less become a fixed time, although I didn't intend it to. I'm enjoying unusual mental clarity. I haven't touched a drop of alcohol since I came into the hospital. Even my penis doesn't get excited these days. Perhaps it's the medication that sends it into a deep slumber. It's hibernating like a bat at the North Pole!

My brother, who's twenty years younger than me, came to visit me. He's married and he's got three *Wah wah wahs*! He brought me cigarettes from Ceuta and lent me fifty dirhams to buy some things I needed. The hospital bread isn't enough for me. My isolation gets too much when the blackbirds sing or the owl hunts at night.

I'll stay here till 21-12-77, then go to Tangier formally to start work again, so that I can take my vacation without having to get permission to be absent. On the evening of 22 December I'll go back to hospital for the whole of my vacation.

We don't age well in this country! People think with their pricks and shit comes out of their mouths, and they're a godfearing people, sleeping when it's time to wake up, silent when they should be talking, and chattering when they should shut up.

My health's improving a lot, thanks to the care of Dr Muhammad al-Ja'idi. (Please write to thank him on my behalf if you can.) He's an exemplary person, treating his patients without favouritism.

You see, I'm writing to you about the details. They're what's most important at this period of my life. I'm writing to you half doped by Tranxene 10 and Laroxyl 25. I take the same dose again at noon. In the evening, two capsules of Laroxyl 25 and one of Tranxene 10 and one of Nozinan 25. And the doctor's taken a blood sample from me for analysis.

I had asthma, like your wife Laila, from 1964 to 1967, but mine was psychological rather than physical or organic. Mine was a nervous condition according to medical terminology. I'm very sorry about her illness, especially when she's become such a precious part

of your life. Give her my very best wishes.

My love and friendship to you both always, for as long as
we live and however much this damned age we live in changes.

O life of man

Our age is the age of renewal

Cut off the big heads

In those beautiful palaces

(These two lines are from my play *Happiness*, which you've got a copy of.)

Mohamed Choukri

Hospital for Psychiatric Illnesses

(New Wing) Majorca

Tetouan 19-12-1977

Dear Mohamed

A morning of development and intelligence and revolution
to our damned times! Take everything I have and don't leave me a thing.
The time is ten minutes to eleven. I've drunk two white coffees.
I've smoked a lot this morning. I woke up in the hospital around 5 a.m.
I went out and walked up and down the corridor, smoking one fag
after another. I drank a lot of water. The smell of the toilets no longer
nauseates me.

Yesterday I met MM in the Nipon Café. We went out into
the street and strolled up and down. On the basis of the science
of physiognomy which I've read a lot about, all the faces I saw appeared
to be stupid. What's the use of a person getting old if he hasn't helped
create a better future for mankind? People are digestive systems,
their glands processing matter, their gastric juices flowing.
"You think they're all one, but in their hearts they are different".
He who takes knowledge from its source speaks the truth.

My roots have wings this morning. It doesn't matter if
they're Icarus's wings, that I wander in Daedalus's labyrinth, even
if I'm not guided by Ariadne's thread. I'm no longer even afraid of
Medusa's gaze.

Quarter past eleven. I'll go back to the hospital to have lunch.

Goodbye for now.

Greetings to you both (you and Laila), and to our friends.

Mohamed Choukri

Hospital for Psychiatric Illnesses
(New Wing) Majorca
Tetouan 20-12-1977

Greetings

I woke up this morning around five. All the patients were asleep. I turned on the light and ate an orange, then smoked the first cigarette of the day, a Kebir. After the first cigarette I lit the second and began reading the novel, *A Time of Silence* (*Tiempo de Silencio*) by the psychiatrist and writer, Luis Maston Santos. I read about three pages, then the patient who shares the room with me woke up and switched on the radio and began smoking like me, and listening to music on different stations. It was about six thirty when I stopped reading. I haven't got a watch. My neighbour's the one who has.

This is my fourteenth day in the hospital. I don't feel at all bored staying here. I'll leave tomorrow for Tangier and come back the next day, as I told you before.

I hope Laila's breathing has improved. I used to be like that too: I used to search for a lungful of air and not find it. At the time of my crisis in 1964, I tried to swallow twenty tablets of Librium. I'd only got as far as five or six when the Spanish hotel owner came into my room and saved me. They took me to the general hospital in Tangier and gave me some treatment which I can't remember anything about, and the next day I was admitted to the psychiatric hospital in Beni Makada.

It's now ten past ten. I arrived at the Nipon Café at five minutes to ten. I don't know anybody here at the moment, and there are exactly thirty-one of them, some standing and some sitting. There are more sitting than standing. Is this a sign of laziness or having nothing to do? Now there are thirty four, thirty six... the number keeps growing. One went out and two others came in. The one who went out has come back, as if he regretted leaving. The day before yesterday I couldn't find a place to sit. The cafe was full up. More *cafés*, more idle and unemployed people, unemployed out of necessity or from choice.

One of the patients came to me yesterday morning in my room. He smoked a cigarette with me and I gave him a glass of black tea. He wept and embraced me and said, "I'm going to liberate this people." —"How?" I asked. —"You'll get news from an unexpected quarter," he said. That evening he escaped, and later on at night one of the patients who's allowed out found him drunk, with a stick in his hand like Solomon's, to control jinns and human beings!

I also have a collection of poems by the Spanish poet,

Aldifonso Manuel Gil. It's called *A Smiling Light is a Bitter Light Within*.

The first poem begins like this:

*Water for all
The people were thirsty
And there was only one spring
The spring had no owner
Its waters were for all
For the people as a whole
But the running water
Made the rainclouds disappear
A child was there watching them...*

These are a few lines from the first poem in the collection.

When I go back to Tangier I'll concentrate on translating selections of poetry from various different collections. I think, at this time, we need poems like these, either in translation or originals.

I no longer have a drink and pour what's left over my head as I walk along, dance along, catching the drips mixed with the smell of my hair, the din of the music making my whole body dance, and sex everywhere, "wherever I turn my face". And the space at the end of this page on which I'm writing to you can no longer defend itself. (This last notion is borrowed from Mallarmé.)

Goodbye for now. With my affection and friendship
The little changeling,

Mohamed Choukri

Paris 31/3/1987

My dear Choukri
Affectionate greetings

The two days we spent in Tangier with you were very enjoyable. They were a change from the monotony and boring routine of Rabat. It's as if Tangier (Choukri's Tangier, I mean) lies outside the normal environment of Morocco, busy with its day to day worries, repetitive conversations and ever present television. You've also managed to create your own entourage with Chentouf at its head, your bodyguard and the one who designs your activities and your friends' faces. And why not? Solitude is boring and companionship—whatever it's based on—gives us illusions which help us to stomach the dull passage of time. When I think of the different ways each person chooses to face daily life, I find myself confronted by innumerable possibilities for novels. How, from amongst all these different ways of living, which have a lot in common despite their differences, do specific moments

stand out and shine brightly in the memory and the emotions?

Who told us that in a few minutes we would meet Fatima al-Zahra, daughter of Lalla Rabia, and experience moments filled with meaning and inspiration? Suddenly we found ourselves confronted by an outline for a novel about two generations proceeding along the same path, but talking two different languages. You know the mother already, and the daughter puts up with her troubles, using what she's read and heard to protect herself from the harshness of a world without affection or support, and deep inside she's overflowing with goodness and the ability to give herself unstintingly, and to feel and arouse desire!

Before I came to Tangier, I had read *Letters from the Underground* by Dostoevsky, and it tells of a solitary, proud, moral man meeting a prostitute. He doesn't know how to deal with the situation and he starts attacking her and trying to awaken her conscience so that she'll stop degrading herself. He's looking for love and offers to "save" her, and gives her his address. He goes back to his daily problems, and his poverty and melancholy, but one day she pays him a surprise visit and finds him in a bad state, fighting with his manservant. He explodes with anger at her and at himself. Words aren't like reality. They're incapable of handling the unyielding nature of reality, and she, poor thing, has believed him and imagined that there are still people capable of loving and giving. And so she discovers that we're all prisoners of the gap separating reality and certainty from the imagination, the ideal and the beautiful images in our minds.

So what point is there in talking about these girls we've seen in nightclubs or private houses? How much more real and physically present Fatima al-Zahra seems than the respectable ladies sitting at home, or behind desks in government ministries, submitting to male logic or cheating masculine authority by living a double life!

Bear with my philosophising, for that encounter was exciting and inspiring, to be treasured in the memory alongside other moments in Morocco or Paris or Egypt, enabling one to carry on with "normal" life. What interests me, always, is the unexpected in the world of women—i.e. every situation is capable of producing an unusual conversation, with references to things which seem extreme or impossible— or, like in Dostoevsky's novel, encounters which disprove the proposition that $2+2=4$. We cling to reason, and yet continue to believe that the pleasure in our lives comes from events, i.e. relationships, which break the laws of reason and rationality!

Who knows, Fatima might become your secretary and inspire you to give yourself more, and write more. Especially since the components of the novel are there in front of you: the mother with her particular atmosphere and life history, and the daughter and

her history, and her discovery of the world of books, including those by the sex guru, Dr Qabbani, as an escape from a reality empty of poetry. And standing right in front of her is her ideal hero –Choukri, her mother's lover– the ideal. Where should she put herself? The world had closed its doors to her, so how has Fatima been able to create her ideal? Tell us, lazy novelist!

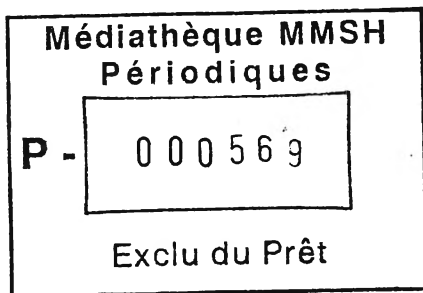
Paris welcomed me with rain and grey skies. I need time which isn't easy with the rhythm of life here. Laila comes back from Cairo tomorrow. I miss her, and there are a lot of questions about our life in the future. Should we stay here? Go back to Rabat? I don't know. I also want to start on a new novel which I feel beginning to come together in my mind and haunt me, but I'm obliged to do academic research. We'll see.

I hope you haven't forgotten that you promised to make a tape of *Mrabet* for me. Please remember to do it.

Looking forward to hearing from you.

Affectionate greetings,

Mohamed Berrada.



MOHAMED CHOUKRI, born in 1935 in the North of Morocco, learned to read and write only at the age of 20. He then became a teacher at l'*Ecole Normale Supérieure*. Choukri has written several novels which have been translated into many languages, the most famous being, *For Bread Alone*.