

Abdullah Thabit

Extract from the novel [The 20th Terrorist. Damascus 2006]

My Camp

I wrote this work between 1999 and 2005.

I have tried not to categorize this book. My purpose in it is for you to know Zahi al-Jabali, who surely might have completed the team of 19 killers in America that September day. He was the twentieth terrorist. He was even more certain to have completed the list of 26, being Saudi Arabia's twenty-seventh terrorist. I strove at how to present these two possibilities, and finally saw that the work might proceed spontaneously, so I made way for Zahi to speak for himself, in his own genre, which I do not name.

I dedicate this book..

-- to the souls of those murdered, which rebuke us. We are tired of the darkness; forgive us, so that morning may return!

-- to humanity – throw away your umbrella and take off your shoes, and let us walk in the rain!

-- to my new pulse, to a land to whose scent I first discerned in my mother's clothes; to my country, the most sacred lisp in my little daughter's mouth; live forever, and may your angels protect me.

Abdullah Thabit

Zahi al-Jabali

Zahi al-Jabali wrote:

Begin

Who am I? How did I become me? What do I want? Where do I stand? Where am I heading? What are the times and places that took me, transported me, to this moment, in which I am starting to sculpt my features with a chisel of truth in these pages, which may someday be of value?

The truth is that it starts with me and ends with me and may never have been of interest to anyone but me. I will be content with my own celebration of it in my own way when I left my pen from the last word of the last line. Alone, I will buy a little cake, candles, and a beautiful forbidden bottle. I will stack these pages on the table opposite. I will turn up the volume of the music as appropriate, given the hour. Alone, I will dance and light cigarettes and have a few drinks. I will then give voice to all the curses that I remember and some that I don't, and will recite all of the odes I remember and some that I don't. I will do all that and more, and more. Exactly like someone celebrating his birthday, alone in a country where he knows no one, and knows only the most basic expressions.

I would like things to begin and end with questions, and given what lies between that throng of question marks, in the beginning and the closing, it befits a man to say that he has accomplished a good deed, because those questions of his may have brought about a new world of more profound and precise questions. Damn the answers and all those who would make their answers our end!

Not to ask about a drink: what is it, as if we were asking about some person: who is he, nor about any puzzle in this world, nor about any people or fact, or, or, or, until the things never end.

Fine. I will begin with the place and the time, the womb from which the fates, tales, and painful stories were born, and the other beautiful ones, and those that are beautiful and hideous at the same time.

The place.

I think: so, why does everyone who writes about their life think of describing the places familiar to them, whose alleys they strolled, whose air and water is in their very blood, whose nature so infused them that it actually shaped their souls in its own image? They write about those places because man is a reflection of them, carries their details within him, and is shaped by them.

So, everything in these pages happened in two places: my village and my city—Abha. Even though they really cannot be two separate places instead of one. Nothing separates my village and my city. They are both at the summit of these steep peaks that divide a small, green, watered space, adorned with clouds, fog, and cool air, which rarely go even a few days without rain to restore their features anew.

No matter how many street lights are installed in Abha, and buildings, and paved streets shops, and markets, it is still a village. It is a village dressed up as a city, just like a country girl dressed up in city clothes, but with a country girl's body that cannot be citified. So I am twice over a mountain boy.

Let me tell you about my people here.

About their nature, their culture, how they talk; what their life is like. I know this seems like no small thing, for talking about people is an assault like jumping from a high place, and the moment of a jump is either an acrobatic act, making all spectators gasp and whistle with wonder and admiration, or else plunging into boulders. No good end, nor anything to admire or wonder at!

Asiri people are gentle and cannot be bad, at least without some reason, without somebody having driven them to the folly of their wrath. They are always fierce and tense, never revealing their unease or confusion. They are so proud that they sometimes seem ridiculous, and any one of them can come and go for years passing right by something they want, they yearn for, without allowing their eyes even to see it, if they should feel that this would diminish their stature or worth!

The mountain peaks where they dwell fill them with the mood of the wind, phantoms, perplexity, and inquiry, for they are one with the wind, with inquiry, one with perplexity. They burn like the Asiri sun, are as translucent as the Asiri fog, as harsh as its frost and ice; as dreadful as its thunderclouds. Were Nature

to rebel and pick a fight with the rain, thunderbolts, and storms, they would joke among themselves that “We see God’s rain is Asiri!”

A mere word that touches the pride of any one of them is justification enough for him to commit murder. For a son of this region lives to exude pride, and exude pride only—over anything—and the same man who kills over one word can be defeated by another word. He will weep and retreat, emotionally and spiritually destroyed. Here, in their hearts and minds, swords and rifles pose less a threat than the word of a loved one who has turned traitor or become estranged.

They have a violent instinct when it comes to shame, so violent that any one of them might take his own life out of shame—and shame here encompasses so much, nearly everything, in fact. Touching a man’s face, for example, is a catastrophe that cannot pass without bloodshed. If two men fight here, each of them thinks only of how to get at the other man’s face, to scratch or leave some bruise to be the mark of his victory and the other’s defeat forever. Should either man actually accomplish this, someone must die—the scarred man will kill himself, or he will kill the one who bested him. And this is just one example; there are so many more. There is no end to stories about these quarrels, about what one man fell into and how the other man lost his footing; and one man’s story had made its way around every village in the south—he had killed himself because his stomach got the better of him. He farted, and everyone around him heard the sound, so he had no other course than to draw his dagger and stab himself.

This indicates their tribal instinct. There is no end to their feuds, battles, and wars, and any family that had not had a member killed in one of these wars of ours was seen as a family of low morals, and the touching of any member of the tribe was seen as disgracing the tribe in its entirety, requiring that its enemies pay restitution or suffer war.

They love, here, and all the love stories start either at the water spring or pasture, or even with a chance encounter among the mud houses or behind a big boulder, wall, or orchard. Love is something they do not talk about except in their poetry, which they reserve for weddings. They come and recite their tales, their sorrows, their loss, their deprivation of the company of their beloved, and no sooner should any of them hint at what went on between him and his girl than the latter’s menfolk reach for their daggers or rifles!

They are so hugely sentimental, sincere, and trustworthy, that if would-be recruiters came to these peaks and there proclaimed their opinions and conclusions, they would find men here who would offer their lives spontaneously, without the slightest regard for killers or corpses.

Asiris are infatuated with musical entertainment and love singing and dancing, and any village there without a poet is deficient and wretched, because everyone in a tribe celebrates and reveres their poet. The men who sing the chants at weddings and other parties are more famous and more courted than anyone, and people here memorize their long poems, especially the odes to love and war.

Also, Asiris are planted in a field of character and values, the epitome of what anyone could imagine of chivalry, nobility, and manliness. They are generous indeed, generous to the point of being absurd, to the point where they might live their whole lives wretched and needy from their addiction to having guests. They are addicted to those banquets they love to overwhelm their guests with, keeping them at table, making them swear an oath to Allah that their hands not be still from the food as long as long as they still desire a single thing.

They have their own laws, which they never, ever depart from. Chief among the laws is the idea that the sole reason money exists in life is to sustain a man’s honor; everything a man can redeem here are his pride, character, and status, even sons, and he will not hesitate to spend it for his image to survive, his image

which he loves to hear people talk about, as they repeat stories about how one fellow invited some other clan to a feast such as all these valleys never ever imagined, let alone our villages, or, so-and-so spent everything he had to vouch for his and his family's reputation! And should a guest from another village happen upon our village, then everyone in our village would gather up everything they could to help out the hosting family; some would bring oil, others flour, and so on. For to them, a guest is never the guest of a single household, but the guest of the whole place, and of course they pride themselves, and compete among themselves, on what they offer him, so that he may go back to his family and his clan to tell them of the generous of the people of this patch of earth, and how no one can compare to them.

It is an even greater occurrence when someone from another village gets married. Then there is an explosion of ostentation that is the talk of all the people for months to come. Sheep are slaughtered, platters of bread, fat, and honey are brought, and precious gifts are exchanged, as the people try to overcome their poverty so that their pride may get its due and its share of praise of the poets in neighboring villages.

Southerners are among the friendliest and most open of people, yet can also be among the most quarrelsome and averse to each other. In our south, once people have started a feud, they will not speak to each other again until they die; yet when they band together, they will not separate until death. There is nothing halfway about their emotions.

When they welcome someone, they say, "A thousand welcomes, a million welcomes, a flood of welcomes, a rain of welcomes!"

Poor people love big numbers. They love big visions. Southerners use them when expressing their joy at the arrival of someone they love—so, a thousand welcomes, or sometimes a million, sometimes as many welcomes as there are raindrops, which make a flood, and sometimes a rainy welcome.

When they talk among themselves, you hear them spontaneously say things like this:

When they talk to each other, they spontaneously utter:

(May stabs of life hit me on your behalf) which means may I bear any misery of life instead of you, and that I'd sacrifice for you by stepping in the way of harm that would reach you.

And they say: (May Allah make you the one who'd put me in my grave), they mean with the previous saying is that when you really care for someone then you pray that you'd leave this life before he/she does and being put in grave by someone you love is the ultimate farewell, being touched last by a lover.

And they say: On me, in the core of my eye. This is a saying similar to the previous sacrifice statement in that the loved ones would always pray any potential never happens, and if it does, they would accept giving up one's eyes, one of the most precious possessions, for the sake no harm happens to your lover.

They also have another saying: I am your sacrifice, and it's like the previous two.

They also say: You walk on my face. This intends to show humility to the one you talk to, implying utmost respect, and usually used during exchange of stories and anecdotes.

Is such delicacy the speech of simple and common people with each other, even though they do not actually speak so; rather, it flows in their blood and their chronicles, spontaneously; they are not aware of it. They are dyed through with this immense self-sacrifice, this sweet tenderness, and amongst themselves they share all this communion, sincerity, selflessness, and love.

Southerners overdo love. They overdo anger. The same person who loves so much that he makes his face the advance pioneer, who loves and is aroused to the point of killing and schism, despite all those tender expressions, is the same one you see using the cruelest and most disgraceful curses. They see people off with, “Allah damn him. May demons seize him! May death stalk him!”

You hear them, in their wrath, say, “Allah break his leg!” Dear God, is there more violent curse? It means depriving the object of the imprecation of his power to walk, by breaking his leg.

They say, “Allah snap your spine”—meaning of course that Allah should pay a visit to the intended, and break his back!

They say, “Sicken and die!” by which they mean that God should visit upon someone a disease that cannot be cured.

Jinn are at the heart of curses here, for the people’s lives in the myth-ridden mountains—for their lives in these mountains are filled with tales of jinn and their evils and their deeds. There are the tales of the *si’layât*, the female demons that outdo mortals in ferocity and possess them so that they come back to us crazed and feeble-minded. And then there were the Seven—the seven jinn whose power to wreak vengeance is invoked by those who have been wronged, or who are so full of hatred for someone that they call for revenge by saying, “May the Seven wither you!”

Or they say, “May they suck your blood!” They being jinn, usually, the Seven whose assistance people here seek.

They say, “May they take your reason”—in other words, may the jinn sweep away the reason of the man beset by the evil portent of this imprecation. And so on.

So this is our nature: either tender to the point of total selflessness toward others, or harsh and violent to the point of annihilation and damnation; souls like the earth where they dwell!

Because, southerners are so tense, contrary, anxious, one minute showing selfless and the next minute calling down nature and jinn against those they hate, that the two of them will hurry to the desolate caverns at the mountain peak, either fleeing with his heart to these peaks, to complain to the fog, wind, cold, and phantoms, to return filled with their nature, loaded down with an excess of sorrows, trembling and saying, “Cover me, Cover me!”

Or perhaps he was fleeing *from* his heart, wanting to be a colossus on the earth, not wanting to be a peacemaker.

I never yet have found one single person who ever inhabited our rocky heights who could let go of his childhood. A baby who fills a house with brightness, sweetness, and innocence is the same baby who whips up everybody with his screams, curses, and sobs—that is how we are.

Among this whole set of contradictory mirrors, the people’s vocabulary was born, and their hearts evolved, and by coming into this life they heard, when they were still in their mothers’ wombs, “Allah take my soul instead of you!” and they heard “Allah snap your spine!”

I acknowledge, on their behalf, their extreme emotionalism, for no one in this world can seek to understand the expressions of his heart, for whom they love knows perfectly well that they love him, but he

can never know his place within that love. And those they do not love knows immediately that they do not love him; nor can they ever know their place within that non-love.

So how will their lives turn out? The lives of these people conspired against by poverty and pride, love and shame, kindness and malice, tenderness and cruelty, wind and breeze, the mountain and the valley, sparrows and hawks, prestige and foolhardiness—for all the opposites conspire against them, day and night, with no letup.

They are all shepherds and all farmers, and all built their mud houses with their own hands. He who has not built his own house is the object of their scorn and contempt. They say, “Allah disgrace him, alive but not a man!” By this they mean, “May Allah bring disgrace on him who cannot be a man with a house and land while he is alive.”

They spend the whole day either in the field, at the well, or in the pasture. They come home at sundown, hungry and thirsty, dunking pieces of bread in clarified butter, then gratefully smearing their faces with what is left. No sooner had they begun to relax a little than the young men among them came out, especially to chase after weddings or other parties, staying up and dancing and singing until midnight, then came home to fall asleep, and no sooner had the sun revealed its morning rays than they sprang out anew to their fields and their chores.

Shafi’i was the religious sect of the Muslim south—filled as it was with knowledgeable clans. And perhaps the southerners’ innate aesthetics could harmonize with none but the Shafi’i sect, so tolerant and protective of the arts, and lenient when it came to women. Moreover, books of magic, especially *The Sun of Learning and Fortunetelling*, made up the people’s culture and knowledge and filled them with anxieties and myths. The southerners believe writing to be magic, and when they say that someone “writes,” it means he is able to enchant others. And perhaps it will be the stories of some of our villages’ adepts of these books that take over the minds and myths of our people.

They say that a certain wise man can, by casting a single gaze upon cattle, cause them to turn against their owner and desert him, to follow behind the sorcerer; and that yet another sorcerer can suspend the birds in flight, so that they neither fly nor fall out of the sky. In our village, the great sorcerer was a man called Suqa, and when people got mad at one another, they would shout, “May Allah curse you with Suqa!” It was said that one of the peasants of our village was once plowing his field when one of his oxen refused to obey him. So he beat the beast with his stick and said, “May Allah curse you with Suqa!” and before the sun set that day Suqa had snatched and butchered the ox, and served the flesh of the disloyal animal to the owner himself. He sneered at the *peasant*, saying, “Eat the meat of the ox you conjured me to take!”

Translated from the Arabic by Peter Theroux