

The Story of the Girl Whose Birds Flew Away

Bushra al-Fadil

Translated by Max Shmookler

There I was, cutting through a strange market crowd – not just people shopping for their salad greens, but beggars and butchers and thieves, prancers and Prophet-praisers and soft-sided soldiers, the newly-arrived and the just-retired, the flabby and the flimsy, sellers roaming and street kids groaning, god-damners, bus-waiters and white-robed traders, elegant and fumbling. And there in the midst, our elected representatives, chasing women with their eyes and hands and whole bodies, with those who couldn't give chase keeping pace with an indiscrete and sensual attention, or lost in a daydream.

I cut, sharp-toothed, carving a path through the crowd when a passerby clutched his shoulder in pain, followed by a 'Forgive me!' Then a scratch on a lady's toe was followed with a quick 'Oh no!' Then a slap to another's cheek, after which was heard 'Forgiveness is all I seek!' So lost in dreams I could not wait for their reply to my apology.

The day was fresher than a normal summer day, and I could feel delight turbaned around my head, like a Bedouin on his second visit to the city. The working women were not happy like me, nor were the housewives. I was the son of the Central Station, spider-pocketed, craning my neck to see a car accident or the commotion of a thief being caught. I was awake, descending into the street, convulsing from hunger and the hopeless search for work in the 'cow's muzzle', as we say. I suppressed my unrest. The oppressed son of the oppressed but despite all of that – happy. Could the wretched wrest my happiness from me? Hardly. Without meaning to, I wandered through these thoughts. The people around me were a pile of human watermelons, every pile awaiting its bus. I approached one of the piles and pulled out my queuing tools – an elbow and the palm of my hand – and then together they helped my legs to hold up my daily depleted and yearly defeated body. I pulled out my eyes and began to look... and look... in all directions and to store away what I saw.

I saw a blind man looking out before him as if he were reading from that divine book which preceded all books, that book of all fates. He kept to himself as he passed before me but still I felt the coins in my pocket disappear. Then I saw a woman who was so plump that when she called out to her son – 'Oh Hisham' – you could feel the greasy resonance of the 'H' in your ears. I saw a frowning man, a boy weaving an empty tin can along the ground with his feet. I saw voices and heard boundless scents and then, suddenly, in the midst of all of that, I saw her. The dervish in my heart jumped.¹ I saw her: soaring without swaying, her skin the colour of wheat – not as we know it but rather as if the wheat were imitating her tone. She had the swagger of a soldier, the true heart of the people. And if you saw her, you'd never be satiated.

I said to myself, 'This is the girl whose birds flew away.'

Her round face looked like this:



Her nose was like a fresh vegetable and by God, what eyes! A pharaonic neck with two taut slender chords, only visible when she turned her head. And when she turned her head, I thought all the women selling their mashed beans and salted sunflower seeds would flee, the whole street would pick up and leave only ruts where they had been, the fetid stench of blood would abandon the places where meat was sold. My thoughts fled to a future I longed for. And if you poured

water over the crown of her head, it would flow down past her forehead. She walked in waves, as if her body were an auger spiralling through a cord of wood.

She approached me. I looked myself over and straightened myself out. As she drew closer, I saw she was holding tight to a little girl who resembled her in every way but with a child's chubbiness. Their hands were woven together as if they had been fashioned precisely in that manner, as if they were keeping each other from straying. They both knit their eyebrows nonchalantly, such that their eyes flashed, seeming to cleanse their faces from the famished stares of those around them.

'This is the girl whose birds flew away,' I said.

I turned to her sister and said, 'And this must be the talisman she's brought to steer her away from evil. How quickly her calm flew from her palm.'

I stared at them until I realised how loathsome I was in comparison. It was this that startled me, not them. I looked carefully at the talisman. Her mouth was elegant and precise as if she never ate the stewed okra that was slowly poisoning me. I glanced around and then I looked back at them, looked and looked – oh how I looked! – until a bus idled up and abruptly saved the day. Although it was not their custom, the people made way for the two unfamiliar women, and they just hopped aboard. Through the dust kicked up by the competition around the door I found myself on the bus as well.

We lumbered forward. The man next to me was smoking and the man next to him smelled as if he were stuffed with onions. If the day were not so fresh, and were it not for the girl and her talisman and their aforementioned beauty, I would have gotten off that wretched bus without a word of apology. After five minutes, the onionised man lowed to the driver: 'This's my stop, buddy.'

He got off and slammed the door in a way that suggested the two of them had a long and violent history. The driver rubbed his right cheek as if the door had been slammed on him. He grumbled to himself, 'People without a shred of mercy.'

The onion man reeled back around and threw a red eye at the driver. 'What?' he exploded. 'What'd you say?'

'Get going, by God!' I yelled. 'He wasn't talking about you.'

As the bus pulled away, the onionised man's insults and curses blended with the whine of the motor. As if the driver wanted to torment us, he continued the argument as a monologue, beginning, 'People are animals...' He blamed the matter on human nature, such as it was, and railed and cursed until we hit a pothole in the main road. The bus hopped up like a frog, croaking until he floored the gas and it bolted forward, roaring 'Zamjara zamjara' like some wild animal.

The cruel movements of the bus began to hurt my back. But when I looked over at the girls, I figured they must have taken the shape of their seats, as they did not seem to be in pain nor was their flesh being shaken from the bone. Finally we arrived. They got off and I followed, unable to hear their footsteps over the sound of my own hooves, audible to all. I nearly reached for my ears. Had they grown longer? I trailed behind them. This was not the Sudanese way, and before I saw them, I would always walk alongside my fellow pedestrians. Yet they seemed to be walking to the rhythm of my thoughts, so I said to myself, let them walk ahead. The rhythm should lead the tune anyway. They walked in front, a music of excessive beauty, and I walked behind, confused and off-beat.

Then suddenly they spun round, beautiful, their faces coloured with an ornate rage.

The older said, 'What's with you? Why're you following us?'

'No, no, my cousin,' I said, trying to loosen the strings of their fury. 'I already have someone just as beautiful as you. And anyways I am not the kind to chase after beauty in the streets with a rifle.'

'We've heard that a thousand times!' she said.

'You don't believe me. I was trying to say that I already have a girl. I love her and she loves me and my camel loves her she-camel.² A thousand times I've come to her angry and left with a smile, as if she lived in some sort of joy factory. This morning, I left so full of her that people catcalled me in the street.'

Instead of laughter, a pure melody slipped out of the throat of the girl whose birds flew away. Then we fell silent.

My mind turned to the memory of my beloved. What a devilish afreet she was!³ So sure of herself, that girl, so confident. Once, when the summer was at its most intense, she said to me as we were returning from a concert: 'My grandmother was so beautiful that Suror himself used to sing to her.'⁴

'Suror and the other singers were slowly crushed by the Haqiba poets,'⁵ I told her, 'until they began to moan and cry and oscillate as if enchanted by the melodic rounds and dirty words.'

'What do you mean?' she asked.

'Their poets are like butchers selling women by the pound. When a man goes down to the butcher's shop, he hears a voice singing and hollering "Breast! Breast! Cheek! Cheek!" So he rifles through the selection of female parts, turning over those bits that please him while the voice draws his attention to the beauty of those pieces he may have missed. He leaves after buying a breast with onion or a flank garnished with arugula, and those who have guests would buy a whole rump.'

My love said, 'Knock off that dirty talk and pull back your tongue. Have you forgotten that Khalil Farah⁶ was one of the singers?'

She left me speechless. That must have been my daydreams returning because when I looked around I could not find a trace of the girl whose birds flew away nor her sister.

I turned my senses into a tracking device. My ears became two microphones, my eyes two cameras, my nose a chemlab and my tongue a newscast. The device worked perfectly, unlike the products made in our factories these days. From there I monitored the situation like a mouse following the movements of its age-old enemy in order to protect itself. But then the girl's radar picked me up. I quickened my step afraid she would insult me, but she ran behind me, saying, 'You've been tormenting me. What do you want?'

'Nothing,' I said, 'except to see you. To sing of you and dream of you! There's no need for pain between us. There's no doubt that it's a one-sided attraction, for I'm enamoured of one like you but I feel in front of her a certain... inferiority.' The girl laughed and scrutinised me, as if seeking to identify what it was that was strange about me, and so I persisted:

'Made of red blood, are you? And was your heart a single rose struck by tragedy after tragedy until it folded back upon itself?'

She laughed again and my heart felt the soothing snow of contentment and joy.

'A poet?' she asked.

'So they say,' I said, adding: 'Who told you?'

'We've heard,' she said.

'And who's with you such that you address yourself in the plural? Why, your face is light and your voice light and you a mirror suspended in my tears illuminated, and so I cry.'

'Beautiful,' she said dryly. 'I had misunderstood you but now the truth comes out. You know the young men these days, so inane and brazen.'

'But dig deep and you'll find precious metals not found on the surface,' I said. 'My friends are more numerous than the ants and most of them understand and are understood.'

The girl whose birds flew away skipped ahead out of joy. Her form wavered until she disappeared, the sweet ring of her bells still in my ear. The image of her eyes remained in my mind, growing bright then dim then bright again, her face still nourishing my memory with joy. Her birds flew away. Away. Away.

And just like that we became friends. For an entire month our meetings continued in the streets: skipping, laughing, discussing – without reaching her true depths – and fearing she had only touched my surface. And so, one Wednesday, I asked her:

'Who is that little girl on your right?'

'My sister,' she said. 'I need her when we're walking in the markets. She protects me from the evil of the cars.'

'A talisman?' I asked.

'What?' she said.

'Like a charm or a spell. She protects you from envious eyes, no?' Then I said to myself: But if death has already sunk its claws in, no talisman will help. I stared in the faces of the two beautiful girls for a long moment. The younger one shrunk away, her strength drained like an ox at the water wheel. No doubt her endless chores had made her grow old before her years. I got

on board the bus with them again. The passengers' eyes, like glass saws, flew over the thighs and eyes and faces of the young girls. I turned. All around me, the passengers' mouths gaped like empty salt dishes. Their eyes had taken flight, leaving two holes in every face. My glasses may have held back my eyes, but they could not hold back my innate curiosity and the deep pleasure I took in statistics: On their bodies I counted a total of 99 round eyes. Strange, I thought, to add up to an odd number, until I looked around and saw a man with only one eye.

I returned home angry and rummaged through my papers until I found what I had been looking for. I resolved to return immediately. It was already midday. The sun was wide awake and I was furious. I found the bus door flung open like a gaping maw and entered. It was like Noah's Ark inside. Every face imaginable. All kinds of peoples. Once seated, it was easy to slip into distracted daydreaming. I sat down and released my strong-hooved stallions from their stables to gallivant through the fields of my imagination and fantasy.

It was as if I had lost my voice. As if it had evaporated. My worries barked and yapped at me but neither my own two eyes nor anyone else's woke me. I was the son of the heaping portion, the steaming dinner plate, but they filled me with despair instead of millet and milk.⁷ In return, I filled others with joy, for my fate was miserable while theirs was better (and good for them!). It was as if I had been created to ensure their survival and they survive to torment me.

And yes, I am the comatose son of sleep, the son of long anticipation and unfulfilled promises. A beloved I have in memory and longing only. Someone like me only hopes for someone like her. And someone like her would never be satisfied with someone like me. So who am I like? You cow, I said to myself, you beast. Man stuffed with disease, with bacteria, with transformations and shake-ups, with ascents and long, tumbling falls. Women searching for happiness clamour around him only to find suffering under the whip. Those searching for a friend he treats as an enemy; and around him gather those women whose birds have flown away – and yet, there is nothing around which he clamours. And despite all of this, he claims that he is one who understands, who is aware, who has chosen to pick a fight and rebel.

I returned to my state of despair to find myself still on the damn bus, the people around me butting heads and locking horns, the men refusing to relinquish their seats to the women, the women not sparing the men a single curse from the dictionary. I needed to get off before Bagheeti Station and when I did, I saw before me a train of humanity propelled by curiosity towards the hospital. My own curiosity was no less than theirs but perhaps I was more arrogant. I rode the wave of the crowd after I had exhausted every expression and exclamation of surprise.

'What's going on?' I yelled, but my question was lost in the din of similar questions. Several interpretations came to me, each independent of the next, pulling together certain details and disregarding others. The responses of onlookers did nothing but catapult me forward, toward the source of my curiosity. I was swept away by the crush of the people around the vortex, closer and closer until I screamed –

'Blood!'

It was as if a razor had cut the light from my eyes. As if I had died. A bloodbath. A bath whose dye was blood and impact. The talisman stained with blood and terror. And the blood of two girls just like them – the dye of henna. Blood on their hands like murderers, and on their legs like the murdered, and elsewhere, everywhere, such that you could not tell from where it was seeping. I said out loud: 'Must've been a traffic accident, no doubt.'

'No way,' yelled an agitated man with a rounded face.

'What, then?' I asked myself.

I turned with the rest of the gaping onlookers to a calm-voiced boy. 'They were on the beach,' he said. 'Twisted just like that and unconscious. A heavysset man found them and went to the police station.'

'It was a traffic accident!' I screamed.

My neighbour, who happened to be among the crowd, turned to me. 'Have you gone mad?' he demanded. 'A traffic accident on the beach? What the hell does that mean? A boat collided with them? Or perhaps a fish jumped from the water and smacked into them?'

A traffic accident, no doubt, I said to myself. Then I turned towards the wide avenue, calling out in a laughing scream, a sobbing, playful sermon: 'No, no, no. No! Her birds flew away! Her birds flew away! Her birds flew... flew... flew...'

Some of the passersby glanced at me, shaking their heads, and then, certain I was mad, they turned away.

'Flew... flew... flew'

A man stopped his car. His jugular bulged with laughter as he asked me, 'What flew off?'

'Her birds...' I replied.

The driver laughed until the tarmac shook and the car stalled and emitted a cloud of fumes. He restarted the engine and disappeared.

Flew... flew... flew... Could it be? It must be that some force took them to that place. Some sort of deception, some trickery. Did I not see the terror and fear on their faces? The terror of the talisman and the shock of the girl whose birds flew away? No... she landed... landed... landed.

Around me a crowd had gathered. They were all staring at me as if I were responsible for the accident. I nearly screamed at them: 'They flew away! She flew away!' But the tarmac spread before me and so I began to walk. And walk and walk. That terrible day! I did not reach the well-spring of my dreams, nor my house. The river was closer and the eyes of the lovers there more reassuring. So I decided to go there, perhaps to cleanse myself or lay my head in the darkness of their pupils and sleep in their solid whiteness. He filled my void and arose from sleep to fight what had been ordained for me.⁸ As long as the innocent birds were struck with stones and selfish desires, they would continue to land in such ugly places against their will, in patches full of violence and hate.

Notes

1. Dervish – a sufi mystic, frequently known for their ascetic lifestyle and ecstatic expressions of faith.
2. A well-known couplet from a poem by the pre-Islamic poet al-Munakhhkhal al-Yashkuri (580-603 AD).
3. Afreet – a mischievous, otherworldly creature of Sudanese mythology.
4. Al-Haj Mohammed Ahmed Suror (1901-1946), one of the founders of modern Sudanese song.
5. The Haqiba school of song and poetry appeared in Sudan in the 1920s, advocating for modernisation and promoting the erotic in poetry.
6. Khalil Afandi Farah (1894-1932) – an anti-colonial Sudanese poet and activist.
7. Millet and milk – a staple meal in Darfur, South Kordofan and White Nile State.
8. A partial line from the praise poem of al-Mutanabbi (d. 965), dedicated to his patron Sayf al-Dawla.