

Beauty will rage within me until the day I die

Hazim Kamaledin

An extract pp (7-17)

Original title Schoonheid raast in mij tot ik sterf
Publisher Dar Fadaat, 2015

Translation Dutch into English
Translator Nancy Roberts

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Opening

My spirit attempts to separate from my body, with me holding onto its coattails.

I soar above myself, leaving the severed members of my body below, where everything is spinning around in tempestuous chaos.

Turmoil, fires, vegetables scattering in all directions, butchers' meat mingling with human body parts. Thieves rob the wounded, while policemen think twice before approaching, and ambulances run circles around themselves.

It's beyond belief!

I condense like a mist into a hard-to-define space, then float around inside it.

I have no way of telling what's happening exactly.

Something seizes me and wraps me around myself as though I were a piece of clothes in a washing machine.

Then something suddenly opens up and reveals the nature of the mysterious space.

It's a long tunnel that I can see no end to.

I hear the undulations of my voice being drawn toward me, coiling about me, and turning me into a ranting machine.

My voice echoes mechanically inside the tunnel as though I'm not the person speaking.

I'm absorbed by a mixture of whistling winds, clashing metal, hissing flames, and waves of the sea, a mixture melded into one by vibrations that give off a faint ring.

I see myself being dragged down the furnace-like tunnel by my voice, which keeps saying, "Assaffah, assaffah! The butcher, the butcher!"

I'm flung into a hollow in the tunnel.

The Forever Friend

His father is like a grandson to me even though he's my own father's age.

As strange as this sounds, it isn't strange in Iraq, where the marriages of yesteryear recognized nothing but social ranks and certain religious norms.

As soon as some high-ranking man asked for a girl's hand in marriage in keeping with Islamic custom, a "concubine" was made available. And as soon as a girl started to menstruate, her family would bury her "shame" alive in some bridal chamber. So, for example, an eleven-year-old girl who'd just reached puberty ended up in the marriage bed of a seventy-year-old man. Nine months later she gave birth to a baby boy, whose half-brother—a fifty-year-old man—was blessed with his first grandchild on that very same day.

So you had a newborn baby whose "grandchildren" were his peers. That's what would happen with religious norms the way they were!

My "grandson," who was also my companion and best friend, was killed in mysterious circumstances that were never confirmed or denied by any neutral source. It was said he'd died in random US bombardment of an open-air market. It was said he'd been kidnapped and butchered, and other things were said, too. He'd been a well-known cinematographer. But in a country that makes its living off death, he won't be remembered by either critics or journalists.

In 2004, some years before his death, he came to visit me at the Theatre Forum on Rashid Street in downtown Baghdad while I was busy with rehearsals for the play, "The Hour Zero." "Jdido!" he said. "My dad sends his greetings and says he wants to come visit you. He's eighty now, and he wants to visit his grandfathers before God decrees the inevitable." Only he ended up dying before his father.

He'd been my childhood friend, even though he'd preserved family traditions and always called me "Jdido," or "little Gramps." He even called me that in situations that wouldn't exactly have called for it, like the times when we'd get into fights and he'd beat up on me, or when we'd start cussing each other out over the fact that his little 'thing' had gone hard when he saw his father's grandmother—my sister—who was a year younger than he was. The cussing match would lead to a fist fight that usually ended up with us getting worn out. Then we'd bring a copy of *Playboy* magazine out of some hiding place and masturbate to make our sinful little dicks stop disobeying.

The Spiral Tunnel

The Family Tree

I see myself back in the spiral tunnel.

I can go anywhere I want to when I'm here.

If I think about something, it materializes right then and there.

If I remember something from the past, I find myself back in the same place again.

No distances and no obstacles stand in the way of my going wherever I want to, and whenever I want to.

I hear my mechanical voice saying, "Assaffah! Assaffah! Butcher! Butcher!"

"I'm not a butcher!" I snap back.

Assaffah, the Butcher, is my family name.

Then I'll see myself transported back to the past, where I'm face to face with our grandfather, Hamad al-Hammoud.

I'll see everything as if it were happening right in front of me.

I'll see a young peacock wander accidentally into our grandfather's date groves. Because it's hungry, it snatches part of a date off a low-hanging cluster and turns it over with its beak. When our grandfather sees the piece of date in the bird's beak, he's furious. Forgetting that peacocks don't eat dates, he screeches, "Put the date back!" He lunges at the peacock to grab it out of its beak. Startled, the peacock swallows the piece of date and flaps its wings to escape. Mad with rage now, our grandfather goes running after it. "I'll get you! I'll get you! Stop! Stop, you damned bird! Thief!"

Screaming at the top of his lungs, he tries to overtake the bird, but, being a famous warrior in the peacock fights of the day, it makes a nimble getaway: from a fig tree, to a grape arbor, to a water wheel, to a country road. This sets our grandfather off even more, and turns the flight into a wild chase, with a gravely-voiced old man hot on the heels of a bird well-versed in the art of attack and retreat.

They finally end up in the village square. The village's peasants come running, gather around, and start pleading with our grandfather to come to his senses, stop acting so strangely, and quit chasing the village's champion peacock. Too proud to give in, he roars, "It's got to give that date back, or else... I'll cut its head off. I'll kill it! I'll butcher it!"

When the peacock, which has been trained in the arts of combat, sees people gathered around and hears all the commotion, it thinks these are the rites of the famed peacock contests in which it's fought so often with peacocks from other villages. So it positions itself inside the circle, as does my grandfather, and the two of them start circling around each other and snorting in preparation for battle. Jet streams of hot, steamy breath pour out of our grandfather's nostrils like an enraged bull getting ready to charge, while the peacock screeches as though it were delivering a political speech to a crowd of supporters. The peacock makes a leap, and its wings collide with the face of a villager in the circle. Taken by surprise, the villager pushes the bird away, and it goes sailing over to the other side of the circle.

Then our grandfather, leaping like a goalkeeper in a soccer game, lunges at the bird, but misses it and falls to the ground at the villagers' feet, while the peacock escapes by squeezing itself between the legs of a man who repeats what his fellow villager did a short while earlier. In a tactical maneuver, the bird swerves to the right, suggesting to our grandfather that it's trying to run away. What it's failed to notice, of course, is that the battle is with a man, and not with another peacock. So, as the bird turns suddenly to attack, our grandfather grabs it by its skinny neck and squawks, "Get that date out of your gullet, or I'll slaughter you! I'll slaughter you! I swear to God, I'll slaughter you!"

One of the villagers begs our grandfather to leave the peacock in peace. It is, after all, the champion of the famous Babylonian peacock fights. But, in the grip of a demonic rage, he pays no attention. The peacock cries out pitifully, kicking and flailing about in a desperate attempt to escape death. When the bird continues to flail about, a hopeless rattle in its throat, our grandfather thinks this is another offensive maneuver, so he tightens his hold. "Get that date out of your gullet, or I'll slaughter you! I'll slaughter you! I swear to God, I'll slaughter you! By my honor, I'll slaughter you! You don't want me to? Then you're going to get it out of there. You're going to get it out of there. You're going to get it out of there!"

A moment later, the peacock wilts in full sight of the stunned villagers, who can't believe they've just witnessed a murder in public. Unfazed, our grandfather shuts his eyes and makes a full turn of the wrist that severs the bird's head. Its body falls to the ground, twitching periodically till it finally gives up the ghost. There, in the middle of the village square, stands our grandfather, his hands spattered with blood, in one fist a severed head. As soon as the villagers wake up to the meaning of the head in his hand, they start heaping curses on the murderer. In keeping with the customs of the day, they announce that thenceforth, a sin of bloodshed will hang around our necks. And because our hands are stained with that peacock's blood, they name our family as-Saffahin, the Butchers, who have no compunctions about taking innocent life. And that's how as-Saffah, The Butcher, became our family nickname.

I'm Hazim Kamaledin as-Saffah—Hazim Kamaledin the Butcher.

That's right.

No kidding!

I'm Hazim Kamaledin the Butcher.

I'm the last grandchild of that grandfather, and the only son of my father, the archeologist Saadun Ibn Abd al-Hamid Salil Fahl an-Nakhil, Waled al-Baghl from his father's grandfather Abdulhadi, who was married to twenty women, four citrus trees, and seven river fish, and who was the paternal cousin of the grandfather of the grandson of my grandfather's sister on his mother's side, Abduljabbar, who was married to the 11-year-old granddaughter of Asim al-Hammoud!

None of this is strange among old families.

Or am I talking nonsense?

What happened to the rest of the family?

I don't know!
