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Suspended in midair, one-third flexion in the knee joints

Translated from Arabic by Alice Guthrie

THE CORPSES ARE SWOLLEN, and the life jacket tossed among the many others just like it on the beach is a memento of those who drowned and those who survived, blinking its phosphorescent ode, *they have passed through here and their passing will never not be here*. Here they come now from afar.

ALTHOUGH THEY HAVE FISHED me out wrung me out and sloshed me into a metal room, in a forest far from the sea, visions of water still wash over me like flash floods—one downpour of rain and I'm drowning in cold sweat, waking in panic, and rushing to put my head under the tap so I can feel safe. I'll go out.

I open the door and see other identical metal rooms strewn between the trees, clotheslines loaded with laundry strung from some of them. "That's our national flag," I once thought, saluting the clothing. I haven't composed a suitable anthem for it yet, but when I do the lyrics will fuse death and migration, definitely. I'll go for a pee now.

A gaggle of boys and girls in the path, playing and laughing. It's weird how kids can derive happiness from despair. From anything, really. I envy how carefree they are, their simple capacity to be in the moment. They know perfectly well—oh, what cunning!—that they're not responsible for anything whatsoever, that they must simply be provided with everything, and they are completely reassured by this soothing existential rule. I've reached the toilet.

The queue in front of the toilets is made up of two separate parallel lines of people: men on the right, women on the left. The universal morning sensation of a strong urge to evacuate the bowels and bladder sweeps aside, for now, the embarrassment associated with lining up like this, the odours you will shortly be smelling, and the noises (known

to us all) being overheard from inside the stalls—those sounds are simply dismissed, as if emanating from something else entirely. And then every last shred of dignity is stripped away from us, torn back to the raw quick, so that those who leave the bathroom—recoiling, noses in the air—don't make eye contact with anyone else, don't greet the people they know in the queue crowding outside the door, give a wide berth to the waiting human congregation, its number decreased now by two: the person who has exited the toilet, and the one who has entered it. The latter tries to ignore the smell that greets them, the former tries to ignore the smell they left behind, and both of them try to forget the certainty of their returning tomorrow to the exact same place, the same situation, the same smell. It's my turn now.

Inside, I'll ignore the view, deny the very existence of the smell, concentrate instead on something more pressing and urgent: what impression will I make on the next person who enters the stall? I ponder the matter at length. Here I am, in the exact spot occupied and then vacated by the others, reduced to a generic reproduction of the same human unit. Thinking of it this way is useful, in that it takes the wind out of my disgusted whinging. I try to defecate suspended in midair, knees flexed to one-third capacity: this is a foreign toilet. Unlike its Arab cousin, it doesn't facilitate crouching comfortably in a full squat without any contact between oneself and the toilet. Many others opt, like I do, for this airborne position, for fear of touching filth. This means that if any of them have diarrhea—and nothing provokes diarrhea like this cold weather and the war it wages on light summer clothing, plus the lack of heating, plus our weak stomachs—the shit splashes on its way down, making the aforementioned fears well founded, sensible. And so the excrement accumulates, layer by layer, mounting to form a sticky brown mass, the variations in its hue apparently unrelated to the variations in its texture. Someone's knocking at the door.

It seems I've been ruminating in here for ages without anything emerging from my innards. My knees hurt, the muscles in my thighs and calves are cramping, and I'm going to be cursed for a smell to which I didn't contribute. Never mind.

I open the door and emerge—just like those who came before me—looking into the distance, pretending there is no one around. I take the long route back to the hastily erected tin houses, make the full loop, as if I've been out on a picnic excursion in the forest and

I'm just now arriving back to my room, whistling or singing softly to myself as I go. I don't go back outside for an hour or two. I stay inside so as to forget, and so that the others can also forget, the sight of me standing in the queue and going into the toilet and coming back out. I just want them to remember me as an aseptic person, someone from whom no odours or unclean excretions are issued, who doesn't sweat, doesn't urinate, doesn't defecate. And holding this vision of myself in mind, I set out for my meeting with the immigration officer handling my case.

Despite his reassuring smile, a deep repulsion couldn't but announce itself with a subtle movement of his left eye. Almost involuntarily I turned my head to the right and inclined it slightly, bringing my nose into closer range of my armpit. "It's definitely not about the smell," I told myself, looking at him.

Why did you leave? he asked me, via the interpreter. I told him there was war in my country, death filled the air like dust, and I was scared for myself.

Why didn't you fight? he asked me, via the interpreter. I told him I was unconvinced by any of the fighters, and that this head of mine—the one I was scared for—doesn't easily fit onto anyone else's body.

Do you have any political affiliation? he asked me, via the interpreter. I told him that in our country, politics ran in the tap water, fortified the bread dough like added vitamins, and that we had never realized we were swallowing it, digesting it, and assimilating it into our flesh.

He questioned me via the interpreter, and I answered, and with every answer the noose tightened, the metal houses disintegrating and getting scarcer, as the riot police multiplied, banging their truncheons on plastic shields with *Rendoőrség* written across them. Even here.

With every answer a tear gas canister trailed its tail of smoke and fell among the fleeing.

With every answer the emergency rations were thrown at the jostling crowds around the truck. A free circus show. And the cameras filming it all. And the presenter saying, live on air: "This is the fate of those who choose chaos for their country."

I chose chaos, mister officer: chaos is an open sea, its coasts to be claimed as the property of whoever lands on them. I arrived on a rubber dinghy, after all of you had already got here. I trailed behind the slave ships and gold ships, the ships full of cotton and the ships full of rubber; I trailed behind the ships bearing the obelisks and the stone palace

facades and statues, behind the aircraft carriers and the ships full of rockets and soldiers—and now you want to spit me back out into the sea?

Mister Jawad? Are you still with us? The translator called out to me by name, bringing me back to the room with a jolt.

Sorry, sorry, I said, my mind often wanders, and I get nightly visitations from nightmares of water. Do those nightmares come to you, too, Mister Officer?

Regardless of the role played by the interpreter, the conversation went on as follows:

That isn't the topic we are discussing here, Mister Jawad.

No, that's not your topic. It's definitely not your topic.

Your application requires further research, and additional work.

How long?

I don't know exactly.

Weeks? Months?

I don't know exactly. It requires further research, and additional actions. You will be informed when a decision has been reached.

But—

I can't help you any more than that, he interjected.

And I left.

There was a long queue outside, but I—like the person who had gone before me—looked off into the distance, and took a long loop around the houses to get back to my room, as if I were just coming home from a picnic in the forest. A putrid smell coated the inside of my nostrils. Before attempting a temporary withdrawal from the world by throwing myself onto the bed, I quickly undressed and screwed my clothes up in a plastic bag—I would wash them in the morning—then dashed to the shower. It would not have been possible for me to remain on my feet in the immigration officer's office. As for hovering suspended in midair over the chair, one-third flexion in the knee joints, that was out of the question. It would have provoked a lot of suspicions.

There was nothing for it but to sit in the shit.

I WILL TRY TO SLEEP, expecting the same old dream: the corpses are swollen, and the life jacket tossed among the many others just like it on the beach is a memento of those who drowned and those who survived, blinking its phosphorescent ode, *they have passed through here, and their passing will never not be here.* Here they come now from afar.