

All the Battles

Maan Abu Taleb

Translated by
Robin Moger



First published in 2017 by
Hoopoe
113 Sharia Kasr el Aini, Cairo, Egypt
420 Fifth Avenue, New York, 10018
www.hoopoefiction.com

Hoopoe is an imprint of the American University in Cairo Press
www.aucpress.com

Copyright © 2016 by Maan Abu Taleb
First published in Arabic in 2016 as *Kull al-ma'arik* by Kotob Khan
Protected under the Berne Convention

English translation copyright © 2017 by Robin Moger

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Exclusive distribution outside Egypt and North America by I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd.,
6 Salem Road, London, W4 2BU

Dar el Kutub No. 26265/16
ISBN 978 977 416 847 5

Dar el Kutub Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Abu Taleb, Maan

All the Battles / Maan Abu Taleb.—Cairo: The American University in
Cairo Press, 2017.

p. cm.
ISBN 978 977 416 847 5
1. Arabic Fiction
892.73

1 2 3 4 5 21 20 19 18 17

Designed by Adam el-Sehemy
Printed in the United States of America

So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot,
I will spue thee out of my mouth.

—Revelation 3:16

Many of the facial features that characterize early hominins
evolved to protect the face from injury during fighting with fists.

—“Protective Buttressing of the Hominin Face,”
Biological Reviews of the Cambridge Philosophical Society (2014)

I

1

HE READ THE MESSAGE AND laid his phone aside. She wouldn't be coming over tonight. Perfect. The fight was tomorrow and he would need all the energy he could muster. Six hard weeks since he'd shyly suggested the captain enter him into competition, only to find his name had already been submitted to the organizers without his knowledge. He filled a small pan with water and placed it over the flames of the stove, then broke open a fresh mouthguard and read through the instructions inside.

He looked at the water, its surface starting to quiver, and once again went over the possibilities. He might meet a beast who'd wipe the floor with him, or get knocked out in the first round, or, worst of all, his nerves might fail him and he'd withdraw.

He heard the water boiling and took it off the flame, then dropped the mouthguard in and counted off a minute. He filled a second pan with cold water, took a ladle, and looked back at his watch. At the minute mark he removed the mouthguard from the boiling water, dunked it in the cold water for one second, put it in his mouth, and bit down. He felt it, hot and soft, encasing his upper teeth on all sides. Tasteless and odorless. He bit down, pressing his fingers against his top lip to fix the shield against teeth and gum and pushing his tongue forward so that it would stick tight from the inside. After counting thirty seconds he removed it from his mouth and examined

it: distorted, taking the shape of his molars, with the evenly spaced and irregularly deep holes punched by his front teeth. He returned it to the cold water, then placed it on the table.

Back in his bedroom he cast an eye over the things he'd need: two pairs of handwraps, shorts, long socks, high-ankle boxing boots, a headguard, a pen and a small notebook, and a tub of Vaseline.

Carefully packing them all away in the sports bag he'd previously used for soccer and the gym, he sat naked on the bed and pondered what the captain had told him: that for his size and weight he was quick and light on his feet; that his reach was a significant advantage; that he learned quickly and used his brain in the ring; and finally, most important of all, that he had the heart of a warrior. He tried summoning memories of every good performance he'd put in over the last six weeks, reminding himself of what he knew, of his strength and speed and skill both in the ring and outside it. But try as he might he couldn't shake the feeling that had kept him up at night for all these weeks, and that had grown in intensity as the date of the fight approached: he was terrified.

Glancing at his music player, he reached to turn it on, but changed his mind. He opened the bag and took out his gloves and stood with his fists in front of his face. Leading with his left foot, he advanced two paces toward the mirror. There was his face, hidden behind the gloves, nothing showing but his eyes, the point where his eyebrows met over the nose, and his forehead. He remembered what the captain said about keeping his chin down. Lowering his chin into his neck, he found he looked more aggressive. Must remember to do that in the ring. He looked at his body, its unfamiliar definition. Slowly he threw out a straight left, then a right, then a left hook, and tried to picture them landing on his opponent. He imagined his opponent slipping them all and answering with an uppercut, which hit him flush. Flustered at first, he tucked in his elbows to close the opening to his chin.

He sat back down on the bed. Threw his gloves into the bag. Went over to the refrigerator and took out the mouthguard, which had taken on the shape of his jaw and teeth and was now too wide to fit back in its container. Then he returned to the bedroom. He removed the old mouthguard from the bag, tossed it behind him, and tried the new one. He could feel it fitting his teeth, taking their shape without any gaps, unlike its predecessor, which he'd prepared in a rush following his first visit to the gym. Glancing into the mirror, he saw his top lip protruding and the black plastic shield sticking out underneath. He lowered his chin, swiveled his eyes up, and set his fists on either side of his head. Warrior, he told himself.

He longed to pour himself a glass of whiskey to settle his nerves but the captain had told him he'd pay the price of every sip of booze and drag of tobacco in the ring, and that the ring was the last place in the world you wanted to have debts like that hanging over you. It was only ten. He wouldn't be able to sleep, he knew, and sitting and thinking, turning things over in his head, would leave him a nervous wreck. To distract himself, he decided to watch a movie online. Leaning back against the wall he swung the computer around and set it on the bed beside him. He typed "full movie" into the search engine and a list of films about the 9/11 attacks appeared: conspiracy theories without end or interest. He clicked "Load more" and the engine continued to generate suggestions. He went through the list without playing any of them: documentaries about born-again Christians in the States, about racist gangs in the States, about Israeli settlers. He'd seen them all. Scrolling down, he found documentaries about Muhammad Ali, followed by more about the lives of boxers post-retirement, then documentaries about Gandhi, Mandela, and Mother Teresa in Calcutta, about the massacres perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge, about the massacre of the Armenians, about the Nanking Massacre, about King Leopold's massacres in the Congo, the massacres of Tutsis in Rwanda, by Serbs in

Bosnia, Tel al-Zaatar, the Lebanese Civil War; documentaries about domestic workers in Lebanon, about domestic workers in Dubai, about laborers in the Gulf, about the greatest building projects in the world, about the collapse of the global markets, about the banks, about brothels in Iran, about brothels in Brazil, about public toilets in Turkey, about Kamal Pasha Atatürk, about Saddam Hussein, about the Khuld Palace purge, about the Iran–Iraq War, the invasion of Kuwait, the First Gulf War, the Cold War, the Soviet Union, the hostage crisis, Osama Bin Laden, Mullah Omar, Baader Meinhof, the Japanese Red Army, Chechen fighters, Hezbollah, Hamas, the 1967 War, King Hussein, Black September, the Munich Olympics, gymnastics, Nadia Comaneci, long-distance runners from Africa, the 1982 Cuban boxing team, the history of hockey, the evolution of volleyball and of beach volleyball. He paused. Perfect, he told himself: a documentary that followed a pair of beautiful women as they prepared for a beach volleyball tournament. He clicked.

His eyes stayed glued to the beach volleyball beauties while his thoughts wandered over possible scenarios for the fight, most ending with him stretched out on the canvas. Without pausing the film he went to the bathroom, and by the time he returned he'd forgotten about it. He began playing with his gloves again. Whose face are these going to be hitting tomorrow? he wondered. Or missing? He glanced at the time. Still only ten twenty.

He decided to go for a drive, a quick excursion, after which he'd come home and go to sleep. He dressed hastily and went out to the car, to find he'd left the window down. Reaching inside, he opened the door and sat behind the wheel. Finding his keys in his pockets after rummaging through them, he turned on the engine and set off. He looked out at the road, stretching away before him. By night, the city glittered with lights and advertising boards, hiding its crooked sidewalks and the slogans sprayed on its walls. Despite the traffic he drove

fast and began to weave between cars, switching lanes like a reckless adolescent. At the first sign that the traffic was slowing he swerved sharply into the nearest side road, and went on turning and turning until he came to a junction whose light turned red a split second before he could get across. He stamped hard on the brakes then lifted the handbrake and looked around. Cafés everywhere, filled with young men and women. He saw a tall, powerfully built youth walking along with two girls. Was that the man he'd fight tomorrow? Then he pulled himself together. The people here didn't box. The thought persisted, though: if that *was* the man, could he beat him? And what about that guy sitting over there? Or the short, muscular one standing by his sports car: could he beat him in the ring? Or outside it? Horns sounded behind him and he realized the lights had changed. Taking the right-hand lane, he crawled along until he found a place to park. He got out and began scrutinizing every young man who came his way, assessing height and breadth, looking for signs of intelligence or stupidity, strength or weakness, and weighing up whether he'd be able to defeat him in a straight fight or a street brawl. In the overwhelming majority of cases the answer was a reassuring yes, but the two or three times he wasn't sure upset him.

Back in the car with the engine on he saw that the heat gauge was almost in the red. He switched it off. Considered calling his mother. What would he say? I've got a fight tomorrow and I'm shaking with fear? He scrolled through the names on his phone. Jad, Dina, Rami, Nart. If he told them what was keeping him up, all of them would try to convince him not to go and he didn't want to hear it.

He turned the key and set off home down the back roads. When he arrived he pulled in, turned off the engine, and sat still behind the wheel. The darkness was absolute and there was no sound save a police siren in the distance. Through the windshield he watched the empty street and the trees along the sidewalk. Why? Why was he going tomorrow? He didn't have to.

He entered the apartment, already stripping off his clothes, and by the time he reached the bedroom he was naked. He swept his kit off the bed and into the bag. After a glance at the clock—nearly midnight—he slipped under the covers and switched off the light. He lifted the blanket, turned onto his side, and closed his eyes.

At three in the morning he was still staring at the ceiling. Each time he thought how late it was, that he was losing valuable sleep which would affect his performance in the ring, he grew tenser, and sleep slipped further from his grasp. He thought of the effort he'd put in over recent weeks: all the times he'd left the office early, the important meetings he'd invented so he could go to the gym; the times he'd canceled arrangements with Dina; how he'd trained every Friday and Saturday, morning and evening, since the captain informed him he'd entered him into the tournament. How he'd felt so proud and at the same time had cursed him under his breath.

At forty-three minutes past six he sat up in bed. He looked over at the clock and relaxed when he saw he'd woken before the alarm had gone off. He put some music on and went to the kitchen to have breakfast, exactly as the captain had instructed him: two eggs on toast, followed by oatmeal with honey and two sliced bananas, and a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice. This accomplished, he washed, dressed, and went out.

When he reached the gym he found the captain and the twins waiting for him in the back of a minibus. He climbed in and sat next to the captain, facing the twins. Before moving away the driver muttered a prayer. When they stopped at a set of lights a few minutes later he could sense the captain looking at him. "Scared?" He didn't answer. "Good," the captain said. "If you'd said you weren't scared I'd have dropped you off here."

He looked out at the unfamiliar streets of the city's East-side. There was a strange sensation in his stomach, as though there was nothing in it, as though it was empty but for cold

water. About twenty minutes passed before they got off the main road, time spent listening to the driver singing over the top of Georges Wassouf. Then they came to another main road and circled the edge of a crowded neighborhood. The truck coughed up a couple of steep inclines and he could tell from the names of the grocery stores exactly where they were. The closer they got they more nervous he became and he longed for the journey never to end, for his trainer get a call telling him the tournament had been canceled, for them to get lost and turn for home: some convincing excuse, something outside his control. They turned a corner and went down a hill, stopping at a set of lights halfway from the bottom. The captain began to gather his things. His pulse quickened and the cold nausea in his guts intensified. Taking a left, the driver plunged into another maze, which spat them out onto a bustling street. He parked outside a house over whose entrance hung a sign that read: Union of Soviet University Graduates. Spectators were queuing at the door, while stern-faced fighters slipped past them.

“Aren’t you going to open the door?” the captain asked.

From the moment the captain stepped out of the truck he’d begun greeting friends and acquaintances; a good number had flattened noses. The captain forged forward and the three young men followed him into a hall from which they emerged onto a balcony overlooking a backyard where a vast plastic tent had been erected over three boxing rings.

Contests had already begun. He heard the coaches shouting instructions to their fighters and saw referees stepping lightly around combatants busy beating each other up, sprays of sweat and blood occasionally finding their way to the table where the judges sat.

He followed the captain, who pushed on through till he came to a group of chairs set in a circle. On one of them lay a piece of paper: “Saqf al-Heit Olympic Gym.”

“Wait here,” said the captain, and vanished into the throng.

He watched the fight that was underway in the nearest ring. These were all flyweight contests. Quick men: light and highly skilled and fit enough to last four rounds. A knockout punch unlikely. The bell for the end of the round sounded and each boxer went back to his corner, where the coaches and cutmen climbed up to the ring carrying small stools. In the next ring along the referee held the boxers by their wrists then raised one up. In the farthest ring, a fighter had crowded his opponent into the corner and was raining down punches.

He noticed that the twins were wearing their boxing gear under their clothes. He'd assumed there would be changing rooms. He changed quickly, still seated. Glancing back at the twins, he saw that Ammar was wrapping Yasser's hands. "Don't worry, I'll do you now," Ammar said as soon as he saw him looking. The captain came back and said to follow him. They came to a table, at which sat two men in their fifties wearing striped shirts and ties. "Where is he?" the official asked, and the captain beckoned him forward.

"Name?"

"Saed Habjouqa."

"Full name," the man barked. "All of it."

"Saed Ahmad Saad Eddin Habjouqa."

"Saad Eddin what?"

"Habjouqa," he repeated. Then he said it again.

"Hab . . . jouuuu . . . ouq . . . qa," the official echoed slowly as he wrote Saed's name on a small card, which he poked into a glass jar.

"It's a Circassian name," the captain said.

"Is that so?"

"How many middleweights are here?"

"Plus your man, makes three."

"Just three?"

The official nodded wordlessly.

The captain and Saed went back to the twins. Ammar had finished wrapping Yasser's hands and Yasser was testing

the wraps, throwing shots at Ammar's outstretched hands and shadowboxing. "Your turn," said Ammar. He sat on the chair, leaning forward over the backrest and holding out his left hand. Ammar began with white tape, which he passed around Saed's wrist and knuckles. Then he took the wrap and carefully wound it several times over the tape. He asked him to open and close his fist. Did the wrap feel too tight? Saed said no. Ammar went back to winding, passing the wrap between his fingers and making an X on the back of his hand by stretching it from his knuckles to his wrist and back again. He worked with focus and skill, careful to keep it tight enough to protect the wrist and knuckles without cutting off the blood supply and leaving the hand numb. Next he produced a piece of gauze folded several times over and as wide as his hand, which he laid over the knuckles and asked that Saed hold it in place with his right hand. He passed the wrap over it a few times before finishing off what was left around his wrist and fixing it in place with the black duct tape that plumbers use. Taking another roll of white tape, he broke off a piece and began to tear strips lengthwise, placing the long, thin tabs between Saed's fingers to keep the wrap pulled back toward the hand. Finally, he pulled out a large pair of curved scissors, slipped the blunter of the two points between Saed's wrap and his palm, and cut out a triangular flap, its hinged base just beneath the fingers. Saed felt air on the cold sweat of his palm. Ammar rolled this flap up to make a cylinder around which the fingers could close in a tight grip.

It felt to Saed as though his fingers, knuckles, and wrist were a single block. His wrist was fixed, unbendable, like it had lost its joint. His hands looked swollen over the knuckles as though there was a second layer of bone there. He opened his hand and closed it. The movement was easy and confined to a single axis. He held out his right arm.

The fight in the closest ring ended with a unanimous decision for the red corner. Saed saw the loser walk back to his

corner with head bowed. Before he'd gotten halfway across the ring the winner came up and hugged him, lifting his arms aloft.

The captain told him to get ready. The draw had been made and he was to go first, against a boxer from some club outside the city. "Where is he?" asked Saed and the captain said he hadn't turned up yet.

Saed began to sweat. Ammar noticed how nervous he was. He told him that if he just listened to what Captain Ali said to him between rounds he'd be all right. Nerves were only natural, he said: Yasser was nervous, too, even though this was his fifth tournament. He was under much more pressure because he had to win, while for Saed it was all just an experiment, a learning curve.

"Experiment, my fucking ass," Saed muttered. In soccer matches losing had always maddened him. He'd be wild with anger, ashamed. Teammates would tell him it was just a game and advise him to try and be sporting about it—and he would nod, without letting go of the thought that his team had lost and that the other side was better. That they, in that contested space—be it field or track or court—had been the better men. He couldn't shrug off the idea that there were winners and losers and that he was the loser. And his fury at losing was not balanced by any wild joy when he won. There was just a stillness, a contentment, as though he'd successfully sidestepped catastrophe. So the possibility of losing here was confusing: how to deal with loss without a team to share the blame or refereeing errors to angrily refer to or a battered old soccer ball to abuse? In the ring, the man who beat him would be a better man. Quicker, stronger, or smarter. Or all those things together.

The four of them sat watching the last flyweight contest begin as they waited for further information. The two fighters climbed into the ring. One of them circled it, fist raised, while the other leaned back into the ropes then began jumping on the spot, throwing his head left and right. They returned to their corners, and then the bell rang. Both advanced eagerly

to the center of the ring and halted at a safe distance from one another. The man in blue threw left jabs, not to strike, but to control the space between him and his opponent, who just bobbed his head from side to side. Without engaging they moved around the ring until half the round was gone. The blue fighter attempted to surprise his opponent with a blow to his chest and failed. On they went, dancing around one another, and then the bell sounded for the final ten seconds of the round and the red fighter unleashed a combination of rapid punches, two of which landed on the blue fighter's face.

Between rounds the men sat in their corners taking instructions from the coaches. "Blue needs to go left, not right," said the captain, looking down at his file and going over his notes. He lifted his head. "Here's your man," he said, and pointed at a group of thickset young men at the entrance. "The third one. Amjad Arabiyat's his name. Twenty-five years old." Saed gazed at him in silence and the captain tracked his progress to the area reserved for his club. He noted the belly poking out beneath his shirt and watched him looking toward the ring, putting his gym bag down, sitting on his chair, talking to his coach. He saw him listening as one of the officials told him the time of his fight and his opponent, and then he glanced in their direction. His face was a golden brown, full and smooth, his features small and precise, with a deep-seated arrogance in his expression. After a few moments the captain said, "Look here. This friend of yours is most likely going to punch like he's in a street brawl. You want to stay clear and box him. By the end of the first round he won't be able to lift his hands."

Saed decided to start warming up. He took the skipping rope, walked over to the corner of the tent, and started jumping, gently so as not to trip and make himself more nervous. After a minute or so he tried to pick up the pace but the rope snagged on his foot. He took a deep breath and started again. He sped up, and once more the rope hit his foot. He stopped, took a deep breath, and skipped slowly as

he watched his opponent strip. Above the two thick arms his shoulder muscles were almost nonexistent.

“You’re on first,” the captain said to Saed as he opened the bag. This wasn’t what he wanted to hear. The captain took out the pads and stood facing him, barking out combinations, which Saed threw quickly but without any power, in order to conserve his energy. “Keep moving,” the captain said between blows, “and don’t let him touch you at all in the first two minutes.”

An official came over and signaled for the captain and Saed to stand up. The official took Saed’s hands and looked at his wraps. He inspected them, tapped them with his fingers, and signed them with a thick black marker.

Saed sat back down on his chair and Ammar and Yasser took his arms, each trying to stuff one of his wrapped fists into a glove, while the captain pulled a tub of Vaseline from his bag and started smearing it over Saed’s eyebrows, nose, and cheeks, then back over his brows, and finishing with his forehead. Looking about, Saed saw that the ring was empty. On the other side of it his opponent was jumping on the spot and grinning at a friend. “Son of a whore’s laughing,” he muttered. The captain heard him and said nothing. Once the twins had fastened his gloves he stood up and the captain fitted his head protector. Despite himself he felt his body trembling. His teeth were chattering and his knees barely held him up.

Then he was in the red corner, perched on a small stool. The captain asked him to open his mouth and slotted in the mouthguard. The referee came over and checked his gloves and head protector, then tapped him on the cheek to make him open his mouth and show him the mouthguard. As the referee walked away, Saed felt his head being forced around and he found himself face to face with the captain, whose hand was on the back of his head, pulling him forward till their foreheads touched. He was screaming instructions, none of which he could hear.

Saed walked out to the center of the ring, where his opponent stood alongside the referee. They squared up. The guy was still grinning. The referee ordered them to touch gloves and return to their corners, and then the bell rang.

Amjad Arabiyat strode forward, taking powerful, undisciplined swings, clearly telegraphed. Saed evaded the first couple, then backed away. He moved rapidly over the ring, bouncing on his toes, as his opponent advanced steadily toward him on flat feet. Saed moved away again, to the far side of the ring this time, and when he felt the ropes touch his back he slipped sideways and returned to the center. Amjad rushed after him before he had a chance to retreat. "To your left!" He heard the captain's shouts growing louder. "Your left!"

The punch hit him hard in the head but he felt no pain, just refreshed and alert, as though suddenly woken from a deep sleep. Everything was slow and clear. Saed watched his opponent moving and tracking him around the ring, throwing the same punches. He blocked them all. Then he timed his movement to slip beneath a shot and duck away from the ropes, leaving Amjad off balance and leaning into them. Once again, Amjad advanced on Saed, who once again backed away and then, with the same movement, slipped beneath his arm to end up standing to one side of him. But he didn't hit him. His opponent came forward again and again, and each time Saed would keep his balance and slip him, until the captain yelled out, "Just punch him!" One last time Saed ducked Amjad's punch, but instead of slipping out of range, he kept close and planted a hook into his kidney, two straight shots to the head, then moved away again. Ambushed, Amjad attacked again, but every time he did so Saed evaded him and punished him with rapid, powerful punches.

By the close of the first round, Amjad was exhausted. Saed's punches had left no mark on his face but his stamina was shot and Saed had points on the card. The bell rang for round two and Saed bounced up. He began with two jabs,

which found his opponent's face, then a hook that hit him behind the eye, before shipping a heavy blow himself. He took a few paces backward, but collected himself and concentrated on moving quickly and punching from range.

Amjad moved slower and slower, and with his wide, swinging punches, he looked like a staggering drunk. His left eye began to swell and a split appeared in his lip. Halfway through the third round blood could be seen coming from his nose. The sight of the blood lent Saed a fresh burst of energy and he upped the frequency of his punches, most of which he was able to land.

The final bell rang and Saed found himself hugging Amjad. They embraced like old friends, each thanking the other, then stood either side of the referee, who raised Saed's hand: the winner on points by a unanimous verdict. Saed climbed down from the ring and the twins clapped him on the shoulder, while the captain congratulated him, and himself: "Excellent." Saed sat down, his eyes on the captain as he paced around him: "There was no need to get hit those first few times, but other than that, excellent."

Saed was delighted, and remained so until the captain informed him that his second bout would start at twelve against the winner of the fight due to start in a few minutes in the farthest ring. He got to his feet immediately and headed over to watch. No uncultured swings here. The ring was a blur of slim, powerful bodies and quick, deft movements, growing more and more intense with every passing round. Glancing back, Saed saw the captain looking on and jotting down observations, and then he noticed that the crowd had swelled: there were entire families with children as young as four or five standing on the seats on tiptoe.

The captain handed him a banana as he told him that his next opponent was no pushover and that his left jab was quick and powerful. Saed had noticed that too. But he had one problem, the captain went on. Every time he threw a right

his left hand dropped to his side, leaving his jaw exposed. If Saed could time his opponent's movement and react quickly enough, he could avoid his right and counterpunch with a right of his own.

The fight began and Saed stuck to the captain's advice. He kept his defenses up, blocking his opponent's left a number of times, then throwing punches of his own. None found their mark. His opponent danced about rapidly in front him, and every time Saed absorbed a punch or threw one himself he felt his energy drain away, as though he'd burned off another bit of a limited reserve of fuel. It surprised him just how tiring these wayward punches were and how the punches planted in his side could slow him down. The third round seemed to drag on endlessly, and when the pair of them clinched, each resting his head on the other's shoulder, Saed was forced to use all his strength to push him off. He found himself longing for the bell to signal the end of the round. He continued to push himself to keep moving quickly and when he saw an opportunity for a shot and threw it he surprised himself with his energy. It seemed to be coming from somewhere beyond his understanding. His opponent buckled and Saed threw a punch that didn't land, at which his opponent launched a straight right from nowhere, which landed full force on his nose. Saed staggered briefly, and then the bell rang.

Saed started walking over to his opponent's corner before the referee grabbed him and pointed him toward his own. He sat on the stool with Captain Ali screaming into his face, not hearing a thing. Ammar dabbed diluted adrenaline into the cuts on Saed's face using a thin stick-like swab, then dipped another, thicker swab into the same liquid and stuffed it up his nostril. Saed looked from the angrily shouting face of the captain to that of Ammar, who was biting gently down on the tip of tongue that protruded from the side of his mouth, as though Saed's face were a piece of broken pottery he was trying to repair, before his gaze wandered over to the referee's

legs, flicking about in the middle of the ring. He found his eyes sliding left, then snapping back into place, sliding, snapping back, then left again, as though something were colliding with his face from the right. Captain Ali was slapping him, and with each slap his voice became more audible: "Wait for his right, then unload your right."

The round started and Saed waited for his opponent to approach. He blocked one left and another got through, but he stayed put. More long moments of constant movement and exhausting punches, and he made out the taste of blood in his mouth. After two jabs, which he fended off, the anticipated right looped in and Saed watched his opponent's left drop, exactly as the captain had said it would. He moved out of range of the punch and went back to dancing back and forth in front of his opponent. Every punch thrown or received was sapping his strength. Every combination left him slower and more exposed to his opponent's shots. His mind was telling him one thing and his body was crying out for something else entirely, almost refusing to do as it was told. After throwing two punches that failed to hit anything, Saed stopped dancing. He was wheezing, he realized, and the gloves weighed heavily on his hands; his shoulders pleaded with him to lower them for a moment's rest. He took two paces back, dropped the gloves, and immediately heard the captain bellowing, "Get your hands up!" Noticing how tired he was, his opponent started to advance toward him, and he moved back until he reached the ropes. Saed took two jabs to the face then his opponent paused for a moment, then let a right go, which Saed saw coming, his stomach muscles contracting as he bent to duck it. He straightened, took a small step forward and to one side of the other man. Stiffening in his stance he glimpsed the face unguarded out of the corner of his eye and, as though the weight of his body was wound back on a spring, he uncoiled and his fist landed on the exposed jaw.

Saed found himself in the neutral corner watching the referee give the count to the other fighter, who was trying to get up and failing. He looked around in disbelief then back at his opponent's attempts to rise. "Stay down," Saed muttered under his breath. "Stay down." The man's body lifted slightly but his legs betrayed him again. Saed glanced over at the captain and saw him leaping about and shouting. He raised his fists in the air as his opponent slumped back to the canvas and the crowd screamed in delight. A wild glee had seized all those who'd witnessed the man's fall. The instant they were able to identify who was prey, everyone turned into wild beasts. Men, women, and children—Saed was the one who'd given them what they'd come to see. The latest performance of a timeless tale, told in a language that predated language itself. He had given them victory and defeat, perfect and unadulterated. He'd achieved what every boxer dreams of and every spectator demands: the knockout blow.

Was he that powerful? That talented? That skillful? As he wondered, happiness welled up in his face, fed by the sight of his opponent, who had gone from strong and unshakable to wretched, sprawled on the canvas. He looked at the raucous crowd, then back at his opponent, then at the crowd, raising his fists. The referee finished the count and waved his arms, signaling the end of the contest, then bent over and embraced the loser. The other trainer scrambled into the ring with the first-response paramedics. Saed was hoisted onto the twins' shoulders, and they walked him around the ring as he laughed as he hadn't laughed since he was a child.

SELECTED HOOPOE TITLES

Otared

by Mohammad Rabie, translated by Robin Moger

Embrace on Brooklyn Bridge

by Ezzedine C. Fishere, translated by John Peate

The Baghdad Eucharist

by Sinan Antoon, translated by Maia Tabet



hoopoe is an imprint for engaged, open-minded readers hungry for outstanding fiction that challenges headlines, re-imagines histories, and celebrates original storytelling. Through elegant paperback and digital editions, **hoopoe** champions bold, contemporary writers from across the Middle East alongside some of the finest, groundbreaking authors of earlier generations.

At hoopoefiction.com, curious and adventurous readers from around the world will find new writing, interviews, and criticism from our authors, translators, and editors.