

A Shimmering Red Fish
Swims with Me

Youssef Fadel

Translated by
Alexander E. Elinson



First published in 2019 by
Hoopoe
113 Sharia Kasr el Aimi, Cairo, Egypt
200 Park Ave., Suite 1700 New York, NY 10166
www.hoopoefiction.com

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

Copyright © 2016 by Youssef Fadel
First published in Arabic in 2016 as *Farah* by Dar al-Adab
Protected under the Berne Convention

Published by arrangement with Rocking Chair Books Ltd and RAYA the agency for
Arabic literature

English translation copyright © 2019 by Alexander E. Elinson

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.

Dar el Kutub No. 21952/19
ISBN 978 977 416 937 3

Dar el Kutub Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fadel, Youssef

A Shimmering Red Fish Swims With Me / Youssef Fadel.— Cairo: The
American University in Cairo Press, 2019.

p. cm.
ISBN 978 977 416 937 3
1. English fiction
823

1 2 3 4 5 23 22 21 20 19

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

Foreword

His throne was on the water

—The Quran 11:7

INSPIRED BY THIS QURANIC VERSE, Morocco's King Hassan II first announced his plan to build a grand mosque on the edge of Casablanca overlooking the Atlantic Ocean during his 1980 birthday celebrations. Designed by the French architect Michel Pinseau and built by the Bouygues Group of France, work on the mosque began on July 12, 1986. The original plan was for construction to be completed in 1989, to celebrate Hassan II's 60th birthday, but due to construction delays, the formal dedication was held on August 30, 1993—the 11th of the Muslim month Rabi' al-Awwal, AH 1414—which corresponds to the eve of the Prophet Muhammad's birth. From the Quranic inspiration for building the mosque over the Atlantic Ocean to the timing of the project's announcement and proposed completion date, the construction of the Hassan II Mosque was a bold assertion of the king's power and religious authority.

The Hassan II Mosque is truly a dazzling edifice. Over thirty thousand laborers worked on it, including six thousand artisans who cut and set the zellij tiles, carved the marble and granite, shaped the stucco moldings, and meticulously fashioned the cedarwood that made up the decorative woodwork and elaborately crafted ceilings. The mosque has a retractable

roof that allows worshippers to pray under the sky's vault. At 690 feet high, the minaret is the tallest religious structure in the world, with a laser beam at its tip which points toward Mecca. The mosque and the patio surrounding it can accommodate up to 105,000 worshippers. It is the largest mosque in Africa and among the ten largest in the world.

Beyond the sheer size and scale of the work, the mosque is an architectural and artistic gem that references much of Morocco's Islamic history, which includes that of al-Andalus (Muslim Spain) as well. As then minister of cultural affairs, Mohammed Allal Sinaceur, wrote in the book published for the mosque's dedication in 1993,

This synthesis is not the result of chance. It is born from accumulated experience, determined by time and inscribed in the project of a new al-Andalus. The Hassan II Mosque comes at the end of a long line of Islamic buildings, Moroccan in particular. In its general design and beautiful perspective it borrows its nobility from the centuries-old Qarawiyyin Mosque in Fes. It inherits the sober elegance of the Hassan Tower in Rabat, the Koutoubia of Marrakech and the Giralda of Seville, all three having been built by the same Almohad ruler, Yacoub al-Mansour. Like the Merinid madrasa schools, the Hassan II Mosque has a library as well. But the museum that tops it off makes it an authentic cultural complex that enriches the entire building and orients it toward a spirituality for the future.*

And just as the mosque is built as the culmination of a proud legacy of Islamic works, King Hassan II places himself at the

* Ploquin, Philippe and Mohammed Allal Sinaceur. *La Mosquée Hassan II*. Photography by Philippe Ploquin and Françoise Peuriot; assisted by Mustapha Kasri, Ali Amahane, and Houcène Kasri (Drémil-Lafage: Éditions Daniel Briand, 1993), 4. Translated from the French by Alexander E. Elinson.

forefront of great Islamic rulers, those who built the Qayrawan Mosque in Tunisia (the Muslim general Uqba ibn Nafi in 670), the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem (the caliph Abd al-Malik in 690), the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus (the caliph al-Walid in 706), and the Great Mosque of Cordoba (the emir Abd al-Rahman I in 784), among others.

Despite the grandiosity of the project and its political, historical, and religious significance, the financial and human costs to build the mosque were enormous. While Hassan II's vision and aspirations were grand, Morocco is not a wealthy country by any stretch of the imagination, and carrying the large cost of this project (585 million Euros; well over half a billion US dollars) was beyond the state's means. Therefore, the financial burden fell mainly to Moroccan citizens who were required to help pay for it through a public subscription program. This was controversial at the time as this burden was quite substantial for a great many Moroccans, and the mosque's dominance of the Casablanca skyline ensures that people never forget it. Stories of public shaming, defamation, and even imprisonment of those who didn't, or couldn't, pay are not uncommon; many families had to pay the equivalent of a month's wages or more in order to fulfill their obligations. In addition to the financial costs, many laborers died during construction and many people's homes were razed to the ground. The mosque is located between the Port of Casablanca and the El Hank Lighthouse, a site that used to house an old and densely populated residential neighborhood, along with the Casablanca municipal swimming pool. When one looks at aerial views of the area, it is quite clear that the mosque, its surrounding esplanade, and associated buildings, displaced a great many residents whose houses were cleared to make way for construction.

A Shimmering Red Fish Swims with Me is Youssef Fadel's tenth novel, the final book in his series on modern Morocco, preceded by *A Rare Blue Bird Flies with Me* and *A Beautiful White*

Cat Walks with Me. It deals with many of the themes of the earlier two novels, including government corruption, emigration, crime, unemployment, and love; all of this with a masterful attention to detail and focus on the working classes. In all three novels, Fadel uses a fragmented narrative structure that moves backward and forward in time, and that results in a suspenseful unrolling of plot from one section to the next. This novel's narrative moves between the present and various points in the past as Fadel examines life in Casablanca in the 1980s and early 1990s, a period when Moroccan society was buckling under the economic pressures of a failing economy, an unsustainable and unwinnable war in the Western Sahara, and a regime intent on vain self-preservation at all costs.

The original Arabic title of this novel is simply *Farah*, which means "joy." It is also the name of the eponymous teenage girl who runs away from her hometown of Azemmour to Casablanca to follow her dreams of becoming a singer. The mosque and its construction dominate the novel which follows Farah and the ill-fated love story between her and the novel's main narrator, Outhman. The building is always there, wherever one turns, and it embodies the beauty and tragedy, the resentment and hope that permeates a world where life is cheap, and dreams and memories are all that exist to keep people moving forward. The lives of the characters are not particularly filled with joy, yet it pays tribute to those who seek to overcome adversity and attempt to find some measure of success and happiness with, or in spite of, the hand that they have been dealt.

Alexander E. Elinson

I

1

THE MAN IS STRETCHED OUT on his bed. He'd rather not know who the woman is whose body is underneath it. It's been a while, a long while, since the man has had any dreams, unsettling or otherwise. He usually wakes to a chirp from the magpie sitting on one of the posts that stretches the barbed wire around the field not far from the railroad tracks. The magpie is black during the day, white at night. Its beak is gray regardless. When it lets out its lone chirp, its tail moves to the same rhythm, as if it is singing with its entire body. It always lets out just one chirp. This bird comes to sing a song just for him, so the man waits for a few moments—savoring or rushing them depending on his mood, and on what the bird expects, so taken it is with this exceptional attention—so that he can respond with his own drawn-out note: *tweeeet*. Just like that. This time, the nightmare wakes him up before the bird sings, so he gets out of bed wondering what time it is. It is close to three in the morning. He hasn't been asleep for more than two hours. He tiptoes across the hall. The light burns in the next room. He stops for a moment and looks in through the crack of the open door. His wife, expecting their first child, isn't sleeping. Her mother is sitting on the edge of the bed holding her hand and wiping the sweat from her forehead. There's a wicker chair in front of the house. The man collapses into it, weighed down by this recurring nightmare. The field is in front of him. The moon spreads a greenish

turquoise glow over it. The field stretching out before him pulses with nocturnal life. The field does not sleep. Because of this, the nightmares don't completely overwhelm him. Once in a while, the flapping of a bird that has just woken pierces the silence. The bird hasn't woken up because of a nightmare or a calm dream, or because of a drop of dew falling gently to the ground; rather, it's woken up because that's what birds do. So, let him forget the nightmare that has so unnerved him. His mind is occupied with what minor worries the new day may bring. Daybreak is coming, and he still doesn't have a story to tell the judge when he arrives. And the baby that's on its way? He also asks himself whether he's happy with the baby's imminent arrival, but he doesn't wait for his own response. He wonders for the sake of wondering, just to pass the time, so that he doesn't have to go back to the corpse. He hopes to go back to the dream *without* the corpse. But there it is, waiting, in the brightest part of his thoughts, underneath the bed. Her name is Farah, meaning "joy," if you didn't already know. Burns obscure the features of her face. Her hair is blue. In the dream, in the moonlight that streams in through the window and envelops them—him, the bed, and the dead girl underneath the bed, dressed in a sheer purple robe—in the dream the man is always frozen in place with his legs stretched out in front of him, a distorted image of what's under the bed ever-present in his mind. He tells himself that the only thing for certain is that he killed her and threw her body underneath the bed so no one would see it. This is a fact. Still in his dream as he lies stretched out there in the same position, nervous and unsettled, with the dead body underneath him. Imagining the hubbub that will rise up outside in a little bit while he wishes for the day not to come, so they won't discover the body. He also wonders whether he has seen this dead body before. He doesn't dare look too closely at the face to determine whether he had had a previous relationship with her. Her name is Farah, if you

still had any doubts! What are these burns on her face and arms? Is there a knife or a cleaver lurking next to her, or any other weapon that might tie him to the victim? He doesn't dare look underneath or around him for blood, or the deep wounds the sulfuric acid left behind. Still in the dream, he opens his eyes and realizes he has dragged a part of the nightmare along with him, so right away he closes them again, because he isn't sure whether he has actually woken up. And now, sitting in front of the door, having seized upon this story, he remembers the judge who loves stories. This is a story that deserves to be told. It will amuse him. His friend, the judge, loves to listen to stories on Sundays.

Farah. He used to sit for hours contemplating her small feet with their perfectly arranged toes, elegant, like fishes brimming with life even out of the water. Once he'd asked her to get up on a chair to grab a hammer from the shelf. She laughed because she could see in his eyes how much he wanted to stare at her white toes. This happened twenty-three or more years ago. They met and they parted in a game the meaning of which neither had understood. She appeared when he had least expected, only to disappear after a day, or a few days or weeks. Like the chaos that was filling her head at that time. The man tries to gather the scattered pieces of a life that had not been lived for very long. Farah used to love blue, the color of the dress she appeared in the first time he saw her. And she loved to sing. Once she said that she liked the sound of Naima Samih's voice. Afterward, when they were in the carpentry shop he and his father had built in order to construct one of the ceilings that would furnish the mosque, she said she had come to Casablanca to sing. While waiting to become a singer like Naima Samih, Farah used to love to roam between the mosque's towering columns, walking around the marble fountains, listening to her singing echo all around: "There's no one, no use in calling, there's no one . . ."

Another time, this happened: In Casablanca there is an old lighthouse not far from the mosque, at the farthest corner of the city overlooking the ocean. It's a hundred years old now. Its stairs go way up. Farah was unable to make it all the way to the top. At the halfway point she went back down. When he looked down at her from the top of the lighthouse, she had gone back to the ice vendor's cart where they had just bought some sweet-tasting scoops. He smacked his lips and the berry flavor flowed over his tongue. Lemon, berry, and apricot. All the fruits were drawn on the sides of the cart. He remembers all of this—the ocean, the wind, the lighthouse and its dizzying height, the seagulls flying around it—and he specifically remembers the moment when he heard her scream. A long, painful scream at the side of the road. She raised her head to the sky, not knowing where to put her hands. She stumbled around like a drunk, turning and turning with her hands over her eyes as if she had been blinded. Then she disappeared, swallowed up by the gathering crowd. Before rushing down, he could still hear her screams ringing in his ears, something between wailing and weeping. The passersby gathered quickly. Where had they been before? They hovered around her with every possible explanation, every possible insult, and every possible expression of hopelessness, coming over from every direction. He turned around, trying to cut a path through the growing crowd. He saw the men and their unsettling movements. With difficulty he broke through and finally looked at Farah on the side of the road, stretched out unconscious. Her face was badly burned, as were her neck and arms, cut deeply by the acid. The fiery heat of the sulfuric acid was eating away at her. The ambulance, and the sound of its siren—he hadn't heard it until the vehicle stopped. A woman threw a towel over her face, and Farah disappeared. He can hear it now—the ambulance's siren—as it moved into the distance, rushing off with its dreadful cargo. He doesn't remember if he actually saw all of this—the woman who covered her face; the

two paramedics who lifted her into their ambulance. He may have seen it all without realizing it at the time, like someone who finds it hard to ride the bus because he keeps thinking it will never come. He continued to search for her, for Farah. After the ambulance disappeared, he continued to look for her among the other cars and trucks that had stopped there, among the fruit sellers and shaved-ice vendors, in front of the lighthouse, then behind it. The passersby who were still coming took the place of those who had left. Summer lovers (in a summer that had begun unusually early) were coming from behind the lighthouse or up from the beach—relaxed, the sun’s gleam still washing over their tan skin—wondering what had happened, as if they were asking about whether the bus had passed by yet. And him? He still believed in miracles, imagining Farah sitting in a small blue car like the ones she loved so much, applying lipstick to her lips, or under the trellis near the lighthouse, singing, “There’s no one, no use in calling, there’s no one,” with the red, berry-flavored ice having melted and dripped over her hand.

The man sits on the house’s doorstep in the dark rather than wait in bed for the bird’s chirp like he usually does. Now he is sure he has a story worth telling. It is Sunday, dawn. He has a story that isn’t new, but he’ll tell it to the judge when he’s asked to. There is no longer a corpse or a dead person or blood or a cleaver. Farah has taken their place. As long as the sun rises. But why is daybreak so late to come? Farah is like a bird perched on a balcony looking out over the wide, verdant life spread out all around it, ready to jump. Farah remains at the ready, flapping her blue wings, prepared, all set to jump, but she doesn’t. She waits for a good wind—ready, trusting, optimistic, prepared to go. The only thing that happens, though, is that the wind never comes. Then the first traces of dawn shoot up. Not in the form of pale lights tracing their way across the horizon; not in the form of a captivating red that

mutes the sharpness of a glaringly bright day. Rather, in the form of a chirp that comes from somewhere close by. *Tweet*. The man turns to where he is accustomed to meeting the eyes of the white bird, before it turns into a black bird. It's there, on the same post, moving its tail as if singing with its entire body. A hymn comprised of one note. *Tweet*. As if written in letters known only by him. The man leans over a little and sees the grass glistening at his feet. He says to himself, "In a little while, another hot day will dawn. This is what its heat smells like." He chirps as he always does in response to the bird. This time, for reasons he does not understand, its echo fills him with delight. Perhaps it delights the bird also—*tweet*—because today he has this story. He is looking forward to the judge's visit so he can tell it to him.

2

A Smooth Green Stone

I WATCHED THE FISHERMAN, TELLING myself he had to turn around, and when he turned around he'd have to see it, and when he saw it he'd have to give it a hard kick that would return the animal to its senses. For a while now, practically since I left the house, it had insisted on following me through the streets and alleys, and I had no idea why. But the fisherman, even when he did turn toward it, gave it a look I didn't understand—extremely tolerant, affectionate, and unjustifiably well-mannered—a completely incomprehensible look, as if he knew it! Then he went back to watching his fishing rod. And the animal, what did it do? It sat not too far away, next to the basket, like any friend might do, also watching the fisherman as if there existed an old affection between us. That was what anyone rushing by would have said if they didn't know what had just passed between us as we ran, overtaking one another like competitors in a long-distance race. I too watched the fisherman and his rod sticking out in front of him as he sat on the rock smoking, paying us no mind. As a distraction, I said to him that fish don't eat at this time of day. The young fisherman responded that it depends on the type of fish; there are those that don't stop eating because they never get enough. Then I told him that fish don't eat during the fall because the water's too cold this time of year. For its part, the animal also watched the end of the rod for a bit, and then it peered into the fisherman's basket like someone who

understands fishing. Its red eye shone in the middle of an ugly black patch. Maybe it was hungry and searching for food, and the fish in the fisherman's basket smelled delicious to it.

I had gone out early looking for the residence of the guy who had made my sister Khadija's head spin. Just to pass the time, I wondered whether the month would end the same way it began, because of the sun that shone suddenly above my head. I recalled this strange thing—in this cold month, the sun was multiplying in a way that made no sense. There wasn't just one sun like you'd expect; there were multiple suns. Everyone had his own sun following him. It was waiting at every corner, around every turn. I said to myself—and I don't like sunny days at all, in fact I despise them—that the month of October had begun extremely badly. It wasn't a pure, healthy, hot sun like a desert sun, for example. The sun above me now was weak and small, which begged the question what such a weak, small sun was doing above our heads at this time of the year. Not at all hot or useful. But it did have needle-like rays. They penetrated your bones and the very top of your head; a vicious sun aiming its lethal beams at the most sensitive spot on your forehead, piercing it. Always in the same place, as if looking to destroy it with its hidden pickax. Wherever you staggered and meandered, it staggered and meandered with you, turning where you turned. In the end, all you could do was curse it and give in. It fixed itself high up in the sky, at just the right angle so that no matter where you turned, its arrows struck your brain's most sensitive spot, making you think this was its only function, this was the reason for its existence: to ruin your day. If it didn't follow you at night into your house, getting into bed with you, even into your dreams, then it would spend the night waiting for you around the corner of the first alley you came to. It had come for no other reason than to destroy your resolve, ruin your spirits. This damned sun only lasted a few days, but it was enough to ruin an entire lifetime. A truly wicked sun. And anyway, generally speaking,

sunny days are only good for lizards and those running away from prison. That was how things looked to me on a morning that had begun so oddly. I crossed the street, sadly enumerating my problems to myself: My sister Khadija's senses had been stolen from her by a man whose face none of us has seen. Also, there was this sun drilling a hole in my skull. Until it disappeared or melted away or disintegrated or set in one or another of the earth's cardinal directions never to return, until it disappeared entirely, I'd take refuge under the tin roof and look at the fancy storefronts, while casting a glance at the newspapers and magazines displayed on the sidewalk. My eyes caught the large headline in green that still dominated the top of the front page of *Le Matin*: "Citizens! Contribute to building the mosque." I wasn't especially interested in this, despite the resentment that occupied a special place in me every time my eyes fell on this headline, as I remembered my uncle Mustafa, who had refused to pay his share of the cost of building the mosque. He had been forced to carry his rifle to defend himself against the gendarmes, and the result? He came to us with a bullet in his right side. Seeing the headline every day at the top of *Le Matin's* front page always reminded me of my uncle. This caused me to feel a deep sadness. It didn't have the look of a temporary announcement or just any old news item. I looked away from *Le Matin* as one might do when passing a grocer to whom money is owed, but no matter how much I might run from him, the debt would continue to increase and the higher the bill would get. When I thought the sun had weakened, I left my hiding place. I crossed the first street I came to. Not far away, I heard children shouting. I walked to another street, but the shouting didn't stop. This time I heard them behind one of the doors yelling, "That's him! That's him!" I turned, but saw neither the children nor whatever it was they were yelling at. I walked forward a few more paces on the same street and turned again to satisfy the devilish whims hidden with them behind the door, and

then resumed walking. This time, I heard the children right behind me barking—*woof, woof, woof!* I told myself they were just the rascally neighborhood kids joking around. Finally, I let them be. I was thinking again about my sister Khadija when I saw it—or did I?—playing with a cow’s rib that had a few bits of meat on it. It might have been the kids’ idea to give it the bone, because kids love dogs. I don’t know why, because I don’t like dogs at all, no matter what kind. My interest in it stopped there, with these details. When I turned around again after passing a number of small streets, it seemed to me that it was playing another role. We were in the middle of a rainless season. Despite that, the dog was walking along close to the wall, as if trying not to get its fur wet, or perhaps it was a way of trying to blend in and seem inconspicuous, just like humans sometimes do. Or maybe it was playing with its shadow like I sometimes do when my mind is clear. Nasty sun or not, the time is always right for this sort of clowning around. This ugly, useless sun is what brought us all of these misfortunes, among them this dog. That’s the short version of it.

A red dog the color of henna-dyed skin approached until he almost came into contact with my shadow. When I turned, he stopped and pretended to be preoccupied with the scenes of everyday life bursting all around. I almost fell for it, but he walked across the same alleyways I crossed, turning where I turned, and stopping when I did. Despite the cautious measures he was taking, I finally realized he was following me. There was no longer any room for doubt over this point. I stopped, wondering whether I could guess his intentions. What did he want? Short legs and a fat head. They’re called pit bulls, some rare breeds of which are for sale. I’ve seen them in the dog section of the Derb Sultan flea market. It’s not a market in the literal sense of the word—more of a wide sidewalk outside the actual market. If it weren’t for the dogs tied to the utility poles or the puppies peering out from cardboard boxes, you wouldn’t know that the people standing around on

the sidewalk were dog buyers and sellers. That's the only market around that sells this kind of ugly dog. A wide mouth with a repulsive tongue hanging out. Thick yellow drool streaming from the sides of his lips. The head was covered by a black patch with a red eye shining in the middle of it, as if seeing with one eye made him look twice as mean. What remained of his fur had taken on the dusty color of dirt. We stopped at a corner. I turned around, and so did he, looking in the same direction I was, as if we were both looking for the same missing person in the passing crowds. In the end, when he had gotten so close to me that I saw his shadow had become one with mine, I said to myself that I wouldn't find a better place than the mosque's plaza to hide. There were fewer workers than there had been in previous years. The carpenters were still there, as were some metalworkers. It was then, as I approached the plaza, that I noticed my walk had become more of a trot. And what did the dog do? It ran along behind me, sometimes getting so close that it almost brushed my legs. I stopped when it became clear that this was becoming ridiculous and futile. With feigned calm, I approached the stone ledge overlooking the ocean and found myself engrossed in an awkward conversation about fish with a fisherman I didn't know—"Do they eat in the fall or the summertime?"—my gaze not straying from the dog for a moment!

I felt around in my pocket, knowing I wasn't going to find a fish to give to the dog. I gave him an apologetic look and felt in my pocket again so he'd see the effort I was making. It was then that I heard him ask whether it was true that our family hadn't paid its share of the cost of building the mosque, as all the other citizens had. It must have been sunstroke from the morning sun that caused me to hear the dog's voice in my ears. Didn't I say it was nasty and that it had only come to ruin my day? First, I avoided looking at him. I continued to watch the end of the fishing rod. To buy time and come up with the proper response, I fixed my gaze far off over the ocean,

which had clouded over, and then I heard him say that he had come only to remind me, just as he had done for so many others who had forgotten their obligations. The dog went back to looking into the fisherman's basket. The fisherman fed him a sardine and the dog devoted his attention to licking it, completely forgetting about the matter at hand until I found myself wondering whether I had really heard the animal's question, and whether he was the one who had asked it. Or was it the fisherman? I continued looking off into the distance, scratching the top of my head in order to give the impression that I was giving serious thought to the matter, even though I had made up my mind about the mosque and about having to contribute to the cost of building it, ever since I had seen the bullet lodged in the rotting flesh of my uncle's hip. I don't know where he is now. He might have died on account of the bullet having rotted inside his bone, and this dog may have contributed to his killing, or at least to his arrest. I looked at him angrily as he continued to lick the sardine. This ugly dog wouldn't dare broach the subject of contributing to the cost of building the mosque with my friend Kika, who has strangled other dogs like it with his bare hands. As for me, I won't be able argue with him, saying, for example, that I stood with my uncle. I've always been a coward. Whenever someone stops me in the street to ask about an address, the first thing I do is think about what his reaction would be if I don't know it, so I pretend I *do* know, making a show of thinking it over for a long time, pointing to a street, then a second one, confused all the while and trying to avoid entering into any conversation during which he might learn that I had never actually heard of that address in the first place, especially if the person asking is elderly and able to detect bad intentions in every face because he had grown up in a thicket of bad intentions. Then, as if I finally realized what the dog was driving at, I said that we were exempt from this tax because my father and I had been working on the mosque since the

beginning of the year. “We carve and adorn the wood for its ceilings, you see.” This time, the young fisherman was the one to respond rather than the dog. Did he *really* respond rather than the dog? The young man, as if to reinforce the pit bull’s words, said, “This isn’t a tax. It’s every citizen’s contribution to building God’s house. Aren’t you citizens? Aren’t you Muslims? Are you unbelievers?” It was enough for the dog to nod his head, malicious and domineering from the outset, as if he had found in the fisherman an unexpected ally. Their words were weighed down with all possible violence and hatred, and for what? The ringing in my head didn’t allow me to find the appropriate response. Apologetically, I said to them, “Soon we’ll finish work on the mosque and we’ll receive our full pay, and then . . .” This is how I do it, and it works when dealing with these types—I apologize and show understanding and enthusiasm, while in my head all I’m doing is mocking them and what they say. This thought granted me some courage. Then the fisherman stuffed his hand into his coat and pulled out a gold frame with a piece of paper in the center of it on which was written in golden ink: “*His throne was on the water.*” He continued to brandish and study it from every angle before kissing and placing it on a nearby rock, allowing me sufficient time to study it as well. The damned dog studied it too. His eyes glistened with tears as if he was about to cry. Then, with a sad yet optimistic tone, the fisherman said that ever since this certificate had been hanging in his house, he’d felt a calmness he had never felt before. He added, “You’ll see what sort of serenity will settle over your house when your family pays its share and hangs one like it in the house’s courtyard, or over the couch. Everyone has one in their house.” That’s how I found myself apologetically telling the dog and the fisherman that I was going to pay. I cursed myself because I didn’t even dare look him in his ugly eye. Would something like this have happened if I had had a pistol in my belt? What could a dog like that do, no matter how vicious? What could it do in that

situation except beg for help? I'd calmly draw the pistol out of my pocket and place it above its ugly red eye. "What do you want? My share? Here it is!" Then I'd fire. Two bullets—one into the dog's eye, and the other into the temple of the fisherman who had allied himself with him. Two bullets would be enough. I calmed down a bit when I saw the dog stretch his paws out in front of him, lay his head down, and close his eyes, like one whose mission has been accomplished. The fisherman went back to watching his fishing rod. At that moment I began to think seriously about the possibility of forming a relationship with him, if only temporarily—with the dog, I mean—in order to avoid the evils to come should he reappear. As for the fisherman, whatever the extent of his involvement, my knowledge of people assured me that he had already completely forgotten about it. I also knew that were I to ask him about the dog, he'd deny any connection to him. He might even completely deny his existence and, looking me straight in the eye, say he hadn't seen any dog. Rather than get into a useless debate, I asked him, "And now what about the fish? Have they started to eat?" He didn't respond.

Before the incident with this repulsive dog, I generally respected dogs, or at least I used to respect them and continued to respect them as long as there remained a comfortable distance between us. More than once I had thought about buying one of those friendly dogs, not the mean kind. Today I swore—just as I had three months before when I saw the bullet in my uncle's leg—not to spend a single dirham on this mosque. This time I was completely justified in sticking to my decision, because what concerned me more, what was of the utmost importance to me, was that construction of the mosque be completed so I could get paid, and rather than give it to this or that dog, I'd join my brother Suleiman who, at the beginning of the year, had gone off to work in the Gulf.

SELECTED HOOPOE TITLES

A Rare Blue Bird Flies with Me

by Youssef Fadel, translated by Jonathan Smolin

A Beautiful White Cat Walks with Me

by Youssef Fadel, translated by Alexander E. Elinson

Velvet

by Huzama Habayeb, translated by Kay Heikkinen



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.