

FAISALY AND WEHDAT

by HISHAM BUSTANI
translated from the Arabic by MAIA TABET

HISHAM BUSTANI

*(1975–) is a writer, activist,
and essayist from Jordan. He
has published five collections
of short fiction and poetry.
Much of his work revolves
around issues related to
social and political change,
particularly the dystopic
experience of postcolonial
modernity in the Arab world.*

HE WOKE FROM HIS GREEN DREAM. He opened his eyes, which reflected the green of the walls in his green room. He stretched and arched his body, yawning loud enough to shake the foundations and make one's hair stand on end, although no one else was there. He got up and peed, noting how his face, which smelled of cigarettes, was swarthy from unemployment; he scratched his cheeks and chin with its three-day stubble, splashed his face with water that was warm veering on hot (it came straight out of the metal roof-tank that baked in the daytime sun), opened the fridge and drank two glasses of green milk (not his usual single serving), downing them in one gulp, and then started thinking about how to come by the cost of the glass of green milk he would drink the same way on the following day.

He didn't think long. What would happen in a few hours, when the setting sun would be on its descent and that other fire would light up the ground, worried him more. He was thinking about the (coming) confrontation.

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HE WOKE FROM HIS BLUE DREAM. He opened his eyes, which reflected the blue of the walls in his blue room. He stretched and arched his body, yawning loud enough to shake the foundations and make one's hair stand on end, although no one else was there. He got up and peed, looked at his face in the mirror and was shocked by his bloodshot eyes, full of small blood vessels and burst capillaries, and the dark puffy bags underneath. He splashed his face with water that was warm veering on hot (it came straight out of the metal roof-tank that baked in the daytime sun), opened the fridge and drank two glasses of blue milk (not his usual single serving), downing them in one gulp, and then started thinking about how to come by the cost of the glass of blue milk he would drink the same way on the following day.

He didn't think long. He too was thinking about the (coming) confrontation.

THE GREEN MAN WALKED through the alleys of the refugee camp, amidst the dusty and swollen faces of malnourished children, and packs of jobless young men. His village west of the river was like a vision in a dream, he'd not once set foot in it, but since his parents and grandparents described it endlessly and in the minutest detail, he knew it house by house, and stone by stone, just like the camp. "That is your homeland and don't you ever forget it," they would say to him, recounting stories of expulsion, massacre, and betrayal—meaning the Arabs' betrayal. "The Arabs betrayed us and never bothered to find out what became of us, and now they torment us, just like

the Jews, if not worse," his father had told him one evening. His friend and the neighbor's son said the same thing.

"Ya wahdana . . ." had sung the poet of the revolutionary mu'allaqat,¹ deriding the revolution, the umma, the cause, and class war, and ridiculing al-Qawuqji, al-Qassam, Kayed al-Obeidat, Mohammad Hamad al-Hunaiti, and Sultan Ajlouni, as well as the thousands of martyrs, fighters, and militants who were immolated in the blaze of the struggle.²

Confirming the poet's piercing cry of "ya wahdana," the green man spat on the sea of faces, cursing right and left at all and sundry without distinction.

When he reached the clubhouse, he was lost in a wave of green men streaming forth on their way to the confrontation.

THE BLUE MAN WALKED in the alleys of the neighborhood, with his mind on his humble village over there, to the south or the north. He visited it no more than once or twice a year: going there was hardly ever possible because his moron of a boss drove him like a workhorse and when he got home at night, he was simply exhausted. He looked at the skinny children passing him and at the swarms of jobless

1. Ya wahdana ("O how alone we are") is the cry uttered by the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish in his long poem, *MadeeH al-Thull al-'Aali*, which references the abandonment of the Palestinians to their desperate fate during the Israeli siege of Beirut in 1982.

2. Since the colonization of Palestine was considered an invasion of the entire region and its peoples, freedom fighters from the Arab world and beyond (like those whose names are mentioned here, hailing from what is now Syria and Jordan) contributed to, and sometimes led, the struggle against British and Zionist colonization in Palestine.

young men sprawled out on the sidewalk behind them. “They filched our livelihoods and took over our country’s resources,” they had told him during closed sessions. “We toil in government and security departments to serve them, basically so that they can enrich themselves and indulge their taste in luxury cars, houses with swimming pools, and educational and employment opportunities. Are we the Red Indians of this country?” The question was a slap in the face.

Which country was that? He had forgotten that his ancestors had come from over there in the days before colonialism had drawn up borders in order to escape with their lives and those of their kin. He had forgotten that his very own grandfather had died in the trenches over there after he and his comrades-in-arms had refused the order to withdraw. And that his remains were not found until sixty years later lying in the garden of one of the houses over there—his grave doused with rose water every day in recognition of the blood oath between them.

“Red Indians . . .” The blue man could attest to it, and he spat on History and its blood-soaked course, piling imprecations on the children of his kind among the residents of the filthy alleys and the dusty-faced people.

When he reached the clubhouse, he was lost in a sea of blue men, and the blue wave streamed out to the confrontation.

[LIVE BROADCAST]

The whistle is blown and the two streams launch forward. Chants and anthems fill the air and, at the back, as in a dream, appear the womenfolk of the tribes, ululating: “If you advance,

we shall embrace, and spread the cushions. If you retreat, we shall leave, and our parting shall be cold-hearted.”³

Initially, only tongues skirmish, but soon fists fly, and keffiyehs are raised, for every tribe has its own banner. Leaning in, the two streams charge forward with a roar, and when the whistle blows for the second time, the two sides collide and sparks fly: blades, metal pipes, chains, and soon rivulets of crimson flow. On both sides, the old and the young, including children, hurtle to the ground. Blood mixes with blood, and bodies fall.

Only then (and not before) do the armed men, faces masked, intervene with shields, truncheons, and tear gas grenades. Deploying both gas and truncheons, they form a line separating the two streams and little by little, the blue and green men retreat—one side goes east, the other goes west until all of them disappear from view.

When representatives of the blue men and the green men return to retrieve the bodies, the dead are strewn everywhere. The large guy with a salad bar on his uniform turns the bodies over with his foot, inspecting them. They are colorless, nothing sets them apart but their emaciated, tired, and dusty faces, the fac-

3. “If you advance, we shall embrace . . .” are verses attributed to Hind Bint Utbah, uttered when she and the women of Qureish accompanied the Meccan forces into the battle of Uhud. The women drummed on their dafs to urge their warriors on against the forces of Medina led by Muhammad.

es of people ground down by hunger, misery, oppression, and injustice.

The salad bar man smiles, the thrill of power glimmering in his eyes, as the representatives figure out to which stream the corpses belong.

[NEW SALVADOR DALÍ PAINTING]

Over there on the hill, in the square fortress that is the upscale neighborhood, the plasma TV with its 52-inch screen is turned off at the press of the remote, and glasses clink as the eight men raise a toast to “enduring.”

The one with the twangy English says: Now that was a proper game of origins, just like we trained them to play. Here is my staff, to strike lightning with so that they immolate one other. Such is the way of my world, over which I hold sway from afar.

The one with the seven-branched menorah says: And, here, my spark from your lightning that creeps through the dry wood, lighting the blaze. Such is my land and the obligations arising from the well of ancient books.

His highness and majesty says: Here is my kindling wood, ready for your fire. I will chop and pile and sort, favoring some over others, until they crowd my door. Such is my kingdom in the likeness of a woodshop.

The one whose homeland is lost says: Here is their memory, their blood, and their land. I will level it like a barren plain until nothing is left but wood and fire, and the pierced cloths

hoisted above it are the banners of victory and liberation. Such is my kingdom in the likeness of a graveyard.

The one with the medals and stripes says: Here are my arms and here are my legs, with boots and truncheons and metal rods, and here is my brain, like a switch ready to be activated.

The blue-men boss says: Your humble servant, I praise your names day and night; I gather kindling wood in my bag and place it at your door every morning.

The green-men boss says: Your humble servant, I praise your names day and night; I gather kindling wood in my bag and place it at your door every morning.

The owner of the transregional cellphone company says: Here are my pockets, wide open and filled to the brim with the ashes from the fires and the charred remains of the kindling wood. Such is my game.

Voices are raised, the commotion swells, and glasses clink.

WHEN THE GREEN MAN—panting from all the running and skirmishing—opened the door to his green room, he was surprised to see the blue man panting across the way from him, opening the door to his blue room. The smell of sewage in the street below was oppressive, and the voices of the scrawny-faced children and the idle young men crept up the window.

“Motherfucker!”

“Son of a bitch!”

The blue man hurled a metal pipe at the green man’s head at the very instant the green man spat out a blade that he had

kept carefully lodged inside his cheek. The two men fell to the ground as one lifeless corpse.

ONCE THE PUTRID SMELL emanating from the room became unbearable, the neighbors broke down the door. Signs of a violent altercation were everywhere: up-turned tables, broken dishes, and murky blue-green rivulets of coagulated blood trickling down the walls. On the floor was the corpse of one man, with a metal pipe and a blade by his side, his face tenebrous and powdery, his skull split open, with a viscous incised wound running from the side of his nose to the outer edge of his right eye.

A BOUQUET OF SUBVERSIVE IDEAS,
DEDICATED TO CENSORSHIP

by HISHAM BUSTANI
translated from the Arabic by EMILY SIBLEY

CENSORSHIP NEARLY PUT AN END to my second book, *The Monotonous Chaos of Existence*, because of the story that you have read here, “Faisaly and Wehdat.”

As its title reveals to anyone who knows Jordan well, the story brings up the explosive subject of the sociopolitical and identitarian crisis linked to origins—origins east or west of the Jordan River, i.e., Jordanian or Palestinian. This is something that is probed for the first time in Jordanian literature, as far as I know. The two names mentioned in the title refer to the two main local soccer teams in which all this divisiveness becomes concentrated. As if that were not enough, the Press and Publications Department (this being the official title of the governmental body that practices censorship in Jordan) formed a committee of “specialists” in order to uncover another serious and dangerous matter: the identity of the characters indicated in the section entitled “New Salvador Dalí Painting,” and who they represented in reality. One of them, I learned later, was thought to represent the king.

The Department sought to uncover the underlying intent I had in mind in writing this text, forgetting that literature relies upon fantasy, mimesis, and the imaginary, and that the reader—any reader—can create endless numbers of personalities based on a single literary character, which the single author creates from a single given intentionality, and so on across endless numbers of readings.

The task of the “specialists” was difficult: they wrote reports and analyses, and “raised them” with the “authorities,” and the then-director of the Department, Nabil al-Moumani, questioned me twice regarding these characters: “Who is this?” and “What do you mean by that?” I answered him several times: that which informs literature differs from a political treatise, and what literature says is a matter not dependent on the writer. “If you wanted sensitive statements,” I told him, “you should consult my numerous political and intellectual articles. You’ll find there what you’re looking for, and more.” However, it was of no use, for the inspector’s mentality was one that aimed in a single, circumscribed direction of his own view and personal interpretation, seizing all other possible readings in a decisive, severe collision with the writing and its horizons.

In the end, had not the political fates in Jordan (which no one understands) carried away the director of the Press and Publications Department before the decision was issued to prohibit the book, who had postponed pronouncing judgment in the hopes that I would back off peaceably and that the problem would be at an end—and moreover, without the hes-

itancy of his successor to commence his “new” era with banning a book—then my book would not have been available in the bookshops of Amman (assuming that people read at all, but that is another matter!).

For this occasion on which 7iber discusses the topic of censoring creative writing, I am purposefully reissuing this text on the basis of premeditation and predetermination, gathering a bouquet of all the subversive and offending interpretations. I dedicate it to the various soldiers of censorship, both known and unknown, who are bound in their work to the confiscation of fantasy, and overthrow their particularized readings in favor of all that is open and multidimensional.

—2014

AUTHOR'S NOTE: In Jordan, a deep fault-line running through society pertains to the geographical origin of citizens relative to the River Jordan: those of East Bank lineage ("Jordanian Jordanians") versus those of West Bank lineage ("Palestinian Jordanians"). Notwithstanding its superficial discourse to the contrary, the regime maintains the functioning of this cleavage in subtle ways, normalizing a corrupt and oppressive ruling class, which it uses as both a buffer and mediator. The management of this cleavage is a textbook example of the ways in which authoritarianism manipulates bigotry and nurtures fascist tendencies for its own survival.

Nowhere does this fault-line acquire fuller expression than in the Jordanian premier soccer league. Al-Faisaly and Wehdat are the league's two main clubs and traditional rivals. The former (with its distinctive blue jerseys) draws its fan-base and supporters from among Jordanian Jordanians; the

latter (with its distinctive green jerseys), hailing from Amman's eponymous Palestinian refugee camp, is the team of Palestinian Jordanians. The rival sides commonly chant racist epithets and profanities throughout the matches, sometimes directing them against the regime. Although criticism of the monarchy constitutes a red line in Jordan, it is tolerated in that setting.

The story also explores post-colonial identities. The maps (and thus the subsequent identities) of the polities we know as Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria were drawn by the French and the British, the ruling colonial powers following the end of World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Neo-colonialism and interventionism are still alive and well in the region, as evidenced by the disproportionate influence of the United States in Jordanian politics (with Jordan considered a "close ally of the US"), and

the 1948 establishment in Palestine of the settler-colonial state known as Israel. Despite widespread poverty and corruption, as well as the extreme concentration of power, lack of popular democracy, and absence of true sovereignty in Jordan, global, regional, and local actors are able to maintain the status quo partly by feeding this rupture.

"Faisaly and Wehdat" first appeared in 2010 in the Arabic short story collection entitled *al-Fawda al-Ratiba lil-Wujud* (*The Monotonous Chaos of Existence*). The story was controversial enough to cause Jordanian censors to try to stop the book by delaying the approval of its entry into the country. (The Lebanese publisher, Dar al-Farabi, had to clear the book with the Jordanian censorship apparatus before being able to distribute in Jordan). The incident was the subject of an essay I wrote that appeared on the online news platform 7iber. It is published here in

English under the title "A Bouquet of Subversive Ideas, Dedicated to Censorship."

—Hisham Bustani

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