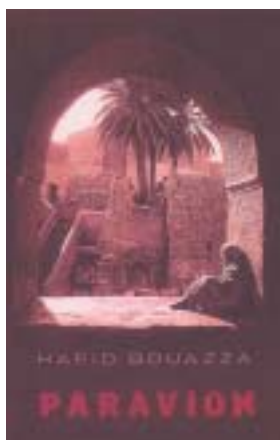


*His most assured literary achievement to date*

## Hafid Bouazza

### Paravion



**H**AFID BOUAZZA'S *PARAVION* is like an Arab fairy tale in its composition, poetic and exotic, but its theme is rooted in the current social reality of the emigrant. 'Baba Balook and his wife had kept his upcoming journey secret from everyone, lest backbiting and catastrophe – the evil eye – should befall them but it was to

no avail.' In lithe, restless language the writer describes a village in the valley of Abqar, where the women stay behind with their children when their men leave for faraway Paravion. This name is a mistake, the villagers who have stayed at home taking the *par avion* on the air-mail envelopes to be the name of Amsterdam. Even Baba Balook cannot resist his father's call, leaving behind his pregnant wife Mamurra. 'Industrious and productive times awaited him in Paravion. When he came back he would clothe and bejewel his wife. She would blossom and glow with gold like a lemon tree.'

Baba Balook jr., born nine months later, grows up in a community of women, with all the erotic pleasures of the situation. 'He was crushed, squeezed, reshaped, studied, a doll without a will of its own in their inquisitive hands, among their merciless nails.'

*Paravion* is a book of understated wit, in which women can suddenly wear 'the sparrow wings of youth' again and men can hazard the great crossing on flying carpets. Bouazza enjoys playing with the concepts of origin and destination, both the old home and the new undergoing permanent transformation as a result of exodus and arrival. He shows alienation, the inevitable consequence of emigration, in a surprisingly wistful light: 'It was the melancholy of an existence in a world which had come into being without them and in which their presence had lost its necessity. Or to put it another way: here life moved along in a way over which they had no control.'

The writer avoids pathos and gravity in sketching the split personality of the emigrant who cherishes the memory of the wife he has left behind. 'I wither and shrivel; she stays forever young.' He enjoys himself in the new country of litter bins at every street corner, while realizing that he has no part in its history. 'That couldn't be good.'



photo NLPVF/Roy Tee

Hafid Bouazza (b. 1970) made a striking entry into Dutch literature with his collection of short stories *De voeten van Abdullah* (*Abdullah's Feet*, 1996). Here was a 'foreign' literary voice poking fun at the 'conventions' of immigrant literature. Bouazza's lyrical style harks back to the expressionist poetry of the early twentieth century as well as the fairy-tales of *The Thousand and One Nights*. In 2001 Bouazza wrote the essay for the (Dutch) National Book Week, *Een beer in bontjas* (*A Bear in a Fur Coat*), in which he made short work of the label Moroccan-Dutch writer: 'Someone who walks with a slipper on one foot and a wooden clog on the other, and that's not easy.' Bouazza also caused a *furor* with his translation of classical Arabic texts, as well as plays by Shakespeare and Marlowe.

*Hafid Bouazza brings lyricism, eroticism and the idyllic back into Dutch literature. He also succeeds in portraying the complex clashes between Moroccans and the Dutch.*

HET PAROOL

*Paravion by Bouazza soars on the wings of the imagination. It is his most assured literary achievement to date, and holds up an especially alluring mirror to us.*

VRIJ NEDERLAND

*Bouazza sings, pleads and entices, he dances and shouts, he is a greatly talented verbal sculptor.*

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**Sample translation from**

*Paravion* by Hafid Bouazza

(Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2004)

**Translated by S.J. Leinbach**

Listen.

What sounds like a call for silence – shhh! – is really the sound of the wind in the trees, a rumour whispered through the leaves by many tongues. And could that chirping of invisible birds be gossip?

They had intended to keep his departure secret. Baba Balook and his wife had told no one about his upcoming journey, for fear of backbiting and disaster – the evil eye – but to no avail. Who had overheard their whispering in curtained nights? Who knows what invisible eavesdroppers dwell in the heavy summer darkness? One night his wife had seen a light in the sky, which flared up and then disappeared. Fireflies perhaps, but she did not doubt for one moment that it was the fire around which the demons gathered every night to share news with one another. They were wont to do so in the Abqar Valley, which lay behind their house. A marriage here, a journey there, an old man in the privy, a maiden at the bathhouse, a black shepherd in the afternoon: no one was safe from the djinns' mischief. Not even with the greatest effort, could the tenderness of their hopeful and anxious conversations have crossed the threshold of their bedroom: no human ear could have listened in on them.

In those days of hushed conversations and desperation, their relations had been more loving than ever before. In a short span of time, years of subdued and homely affection began to colour the woman's eyes with unabashed love: her

irises blossomed like sunflowers. The pregnancy made her pupils unusually large. Greedily she soaked up her husband's image from all sides, and slowly lowering her eyelashes, drew it, almost piously, inside her, storing it for future use. Baba Balook's gaze and touch had a softened and rejuvenated effect. When he caressed her, every wrinkle in his hands took part, and each caress seemed to spread out into ripples which raced across her skin and caused the corners of her mouth to curl upwards. She shivered. The touch of his fingertips was more pleasant than a throng of breezes from different directions meeting in an apple tree, though no tree could blush the way she did.

Her skin was a landscape of white, and her face was the east: two suns rose there as blushing cheeks; her breasts were the west: there the suns set as areolas. She was so white that it seemed as if she lived in darkness and had never seen the daylight, nor the daylight her. It could also be the result of her frequent visits to the bathhouse, which she loved, spending many an afternoon there. Her feet were as red as the ground on which they walked. The other women, themselves hazel or mahogany, envied her alabaster. Her name was Mamourra.

When her eyes were saturated with his image, she laid the fragile warmth of her back against his bosom, where a letter was beating. His arms encircled her life-carrying body, grasping her as if she were a basket of summer fruits. She rolled around in his embrace and gazed up at him; he held her face caged in his hands. Her chin rested where the fleshy parts of his palms came together, and he kissed her mouth and forehead. A curse, a curse be upon whoever revealed the reason for these entanglements!

And all that time the letter lived between them like a child or a precious animal, in addition to the two goats and the donkey.

It hurt her that all her precautions had proved to be in vain. But even she was helpless in the face of rumour, which never slept and had countless echoes like maidservants in the ravines and plains of northern Morea (that's Moorland to you, gentlemen), where the white hamlet barely managed to eke a living on the red earth and seized upon anything that might divert it from its bored existence. A

single word caught by a leaf of the grapevine. Still seedless, like a woman's delight, it crept over the walls of their house to a hereafter of shrieking markets and – who knows? – sinful glass. One such word told to the wind, which repeated it in the women's rooms, was enough to bring the hamlet into a state of agitation, flapping with gossip like a sail in the wind.

Even the amulets and formulas given to her by the midwives Cheira and Heira, an inseparable couple who had raised Mamourra, turned out to be useless. On the morning of his departure, when all this became clear, poor Mamourra cried her heart out.

It was ten years after his father – who was also called Baba Balook – had left, that Baba Balook, Mamourra's husband, decided to follow him. It was seven years since his father's letter had reached them. It was the year the neighbours' donkey had fallen into a ravine, a year of scarcity (the price of potatoes soared). After that they had never heard anything more from him. An owl had visited their house almost every night, chanting his mournful 'oo-hoo' at the window. The cry comforted them, and they felt that everything was all right with father. Mamourra had a miscarriage; there seemed to be no end to her bleeding. Clots of blood dotted the white sheet. The cramps were unbearable, but Cheira and Heira managed to give her medicines to relieve the pain, medicines which also induced wondrous visions and dreams.

Yet the childless couple did not give up. They braved the slander of the neighbour women – the hamlet was so small that every woman there was a neighbour – and their sex became more rigorous, purposeful, but at the same time more desperate. Baba Balook may have suffered from a lack of imagination and an underdeveloped desire for variety in bed, but he made up for these things by a tirelessness which, though perhaps monotonous, attested to what he called virility. What more do you want? His wife said nothing and was patient.

It was during one white siesta hour, that the sweaty, red-dusted postman had ridden up on a battered, red-dusted motorbike, a Solex. A wild herd of dust

clouds followed him. The people who were outside stopped what they were doing, if indeed they were doing anything, and looked at him in awe. The women who were working indoors ran outside. He stopped in front of Baba Balook and Mamourra's house. He dismounted and leaned his Solex against the wall. The dust clouds faded away.

He took off his faded cap, wiped off the sweat with his forearms and squinted at the sun, his eyelashes aflutter. After spitting on the ground – the people recoiled with a start – he knocked on the rusty door and handed Baba Balook an envelope, which was tattered and covered in red dust, as if it had covered the distance on foot. It had been picked at so often by various hands that its corners were now dog-eared. A blue-and-white stamp with a strange bird on it gave the name of the country from which it had come. The address had been scribbled on it in an elegant hand, in ring-shaped letters, dark feathers on the white breast of a bird of prey. Baba Balook thanked the postman, who rode off, leaving behind red ghosts. Trembling, he reverently opened the envelope and unfolded the letter, which was several pages long. The paper was fine and delicate and somewhat grainy like the skin of a young girl with goose pimples. He cried as he looked over the contents and kissed the violet ink with his dark purple lips, weeping more profusely with every successive page.

'Be careful,' said Mamourra, 'or the words will all be washed away.'

The people crowded around the house to see if they could overhear anything. They peeked under the door. One man even tried climbing up on the roof with the help of the grapevine, which he trampled with his slippers. But then he saw a chameleon and fell to the ground in fright.

Baba Balook came outside and the people scattered. He climbed onto his donkey and set off for the city to find someone who could read the letter for him. It seemed as if he could taste his father's words on his lips, and halfway there, he suddenly stopped and turned around, urging the donkey to quicken its sluggish gait. Maybe it was because he had tasted the ink or because he thought he could hear his father's voice in the incomprehensible words he had just seen, but

whatever the reason, he felt he understood what the letter said. The ink flowed through his veins. The words were etched in his heart.

He trotted into the house on the donkey, and before his wife had a chance to recover from the shock and give him a piece of her mind – she had just scrubbed the floor – he closed his eyes and spoke in a peremptory tone: ‘Listen!’

The content of the letter rolled out of his mouth. His wife began to weep with joy.

‘Why didn’t you ever tell me you could read?’

‘Because I can’t,’ he answered truthfully. He did know the address on the envelope, and the name of the country where his father had settled: Paravion. That was what it said on the big, rectangular stamp. White on blue: the colours of Paravion.

That night they fell asleep to the melody of his father’s words, which he repeated once again before retiring. The letter became the apple of the couple’s eye.

The envelope survived for many years, till at a certain point it slowly began to disintegrate into tiny bits of down which danced in the sunlight. The paper became coarser and began to exhibit wrinkles and other signs of old age, until the ink bled and the whole thing turned to dust, which merrily followed the tiny feathers into the paths of light. But the letter’s content was preserved on the lips and in the heart of Baba Balook and now of Mamourra too, who mumbled the words to herself during her household chores, as another woman might hum or sing. Later she would actually sing the words to herself. She had a lovely voice. As a child, Cheira and Heira had told her, a nightingale had landed on her mouth. And her permanently blushing cheeks were two happy robins. They had found her under a tree, a foundling, a daughter of the moon.

Baba Balook had to leave. The food shortage was only getting worse. The price of vegetables, particularly tomatoes and potatoes, had reached spectacular heights, and nothing, certainly not the weather, suggested that it would come down. In Paravion, fruitful and industrious times lay ahead. And when he

returned he would clothe and bejewel his wife, and she would blossom and gleam with gold like a lemon tree.

Baba Balook and Mamourra had never been well liked by the other villagers, who eyed them with suspicion. They were even a little afraid of the woman, owing to her unknown origins and her ethereal appearance: oh, that marvellous white skin that withstood the daggers of their looks. But it was mainly because of her bond with Cheira and Heira, whom the villagers considered to be witches, even though they benefited greatly from their herbs and amulets whenever they were tormented by mysterious maladies and illnesses. They believed she was the daughter of a demon. For Baba Balook, however, they felt nothing but undisguised contempt. They called him a slave and would have driven him out of the village long ago if he had not been married to her. Their contempt and envy were accompanied, as is so often the case, by intense curiosity. Thus, as soon as the letter arrived and all their furtive efforts to overhear something proved futile, they began gathering together under the indigo sky: either Baba Balook and his wife would share the contents of the letter with them, or the two would be stoned out of the village. It was unheard-of, all those secrets between the two of them. It was sheer audacity, that's what it was. They decided to meet the next morning in front of their house and already started looking for suitable stones. They would have carried out their plan too, if the village elder had not put a stop to it. Not so much out of sympathy for the couple, but for fear of the vengeance of Cheira and Heira, whose squinty eyes and quivering eyelids could almost literally petrify a person. Even the children knew the viciousness of their fingers all too well: how many times had they been pinched, after calling the sisters names or pelting them with pebbles? The bite of a mosquito or the sting of a wasp was nothing compared to their nails. Whenever some young scamp dared to taunt them from a distance, they had him in their clutches in a matter of moments, no matter how far away they had been, laying into him with their venomous digits: 'Come here, you son of an arsehole!' None dared speak of it; they all feared their tight-lipped

mouths and menacing looks. And when the boy was eventually released, he could look forward to another good thrashing, this time from his parents. Sometimes a mother's pleas persuaded them to spare the victim, since they were not heartless. The boy's frightened eyes would watch those black nails get chillingly close, preparing a scream that was already welling up from the depths of his young bowels, but they stopped halfway: the mother fell to her knees, rolled around in the dust and kissed the hem of their clothes. Then they let the brat go; the mother grabbed his arm and dragged him home with her, to be given a beating even more merciless than any punishment from the two hags.

Sometimes the mother walked up the hill to the twins a day later for leopard's bane to heal her son's bruises.

Whenever the children were disobedient, which was permanently the case with the boys, the mothers only needed to threaten to fetch the two witches, and they began crying as if the dreaded women were actually on their way. This strategy worked exceedingly well, and after a while Cheira and Heira were left in peace. At times they regretted it.

'Let them be,' the village elder said, 'our time will come.' The disappointed villagers slunk away, casting furious looks at the door, looks which carried the threat of return. Just you wait.

All that time Baba Balook and Mamourra were blissfully unaware of what was being plotted around them. Through their joy over the letter they lived in a perpetual springtime. They picked father's words like apples from each other's lips. They kissed and hugged each other. Baba Balook even began to take time for foreplay – not much time, to be sure, but still. It seemed that with the arrival of the letter the mild spirit of Paravion had come over him. His fingers performed figures of eight over her skin. Her saliva was refreshing. The sky was reflected in her eyelids and filled her mouth whenever she closed her eyes to plunge into the same darkness into which the impatient Baba Balook had already disappeared. But spring or not, no fruit would grow in her womb.

The caravan of mountains on the horizon did not depart, and never arrived anywhere. After a few summers the hooting of an owl began to echo through those stony heights, every faithful night. The dry seasons did not go by much faster than that mountain range. The cries came closer and closer, and not long afterward an owl alighted on their bedroom window sill. A white, skull-shaped owl with big black eyes and black curls on its chest, so fine that they looked like someone's scribbling. With its head – hoo-hoo! – it scouted out the four points of the compass, and flew from house to house. And two months before Baba Balook's departure, Mamourra became pregnant, later than the other women. The grapes ripened, and through their translucent skin seeds could be discerned, like foetuses. Baba Balook had been insensible to most of the herbs and medicines, but greasing the soles of his feet with bat brains, on the advice of Cheira and Heira, had evidently helped.

Tiny feathers floated out of Baba Balook's house, white as almond or lemon blossoms. The children ran after them. For a moment the people thought it was snowing, until the downy feathers landed in the palms of their hands.

But who had given away their secret decision?

The twins Cheira and Heira lived on top of a hill in a rickety hut in the shade of a carob tree. This tree was always filled with birds and their antiphonal twittering, though most of the time they were invisible. The leaves were in constant motion. The two women were inseparable. No one had ever seen them apart. It was also unclear how they moved. Their feet were invisible; the fringes of their clothes trailed along the ground. They walked, shuffled, or rather waddled, or better yet, rolled, always arm in arm under the draperies of their slovenly and abundant clothing, each supporting herself on a cane. They had tattoos on their chins; their hands were black with lavish henna patterns, they were coarsely wrinkled like twisted willows or the face of a cliff, and their mouths were almost impossible to find amidst the creases of skin. Considering they were a few centuries old (they

had seen the mountains grow up, I'll have you know, gentlemen), they looked good for their age. Their skin was almost as draped as their attire, which was typical of women in that country: pieces of fabric, one on top of the other, fastened together with the occasional button, forming pouches which could just have well have been droopy curves as bulging folds, with many loose stitches of imitation gold thread and on top of it all a shawl with wide stripes. They had more layers than an onion.

Their deep-set eyes with doleful lids were home to a lively light in grey-green irises. They were called 'nimble eyes', eyes that never missed a thing and betrayed a fondness for the obscene side of life. Thus they descended into peals of raucous laughter when they placed pomegranate flowers on their laps and showed them to Mamourra as an introduction to the anatomical mysteries of womanhood. The yellow powder from the stamens stuck to their fingers, and they laughed at the suggestive words that only women know, while Mamourra blushed with embarrassment, although that is hard to say for certain, because she was always blushing. They stroked her skin and fondled her lissom limbs with more sensuality than was good for her.

'We hope your husband knows his way around this satin flesh,' they said, neighing again with shrill laughter. They held her face by her lovely chinnikin – as they called it – and sighed at the sight of so much beauty, at the colourful palette of her eyes and mouth, an ibis curled up in the snow.

'Lend us your breasts, child. One is enough; you mustn't underestimate your mothers.' They tugged at them and petted her locks and hips.

And we needn't go into detail about all that they taught her with the help of figs.

'Enough already,' mumbled Mamourra.

They held her tight to their bountiful bosoms and laughed jubilantly. Their love for her rivalled that of a real mother. The way she had been lying there under that fig tree in Abqar, a gurgling little molecule of a person, a floundering droplet of the moon, green and yellow shadows playing over her pearly white body. She

gave off an intoxicating scent, her eyes big and happy with the heavens in the vaults of her eyelids.

Cheira and Heira were missing many of their teeth, and the few they did have were yellowish ivory. They spent the cool hours of the day looking for herbs and plants. Bickering, chattering and giggling like women at market, they searched cuminous valleys, gingery plains, and cinnamoniferous mountain passes. Even though it was an arid environment – the most common flora were cactuses, thistles and grey, dry olive trees – they always managed to come back with large quantities in the laps of their clothing. Bouquets of fresh and succulent plants, which were supposed to grow in regions with abundant water or near mountain streams or in fertile wadis: any region, in short, except the one they lived in. They gathered harmel, nightshade, baneberry, mandrake, poppy bulbs and ergots, and they sold parsley, lavender, rosemary, coriander and spearmint to the women, who searched for these plants in vain. With their medicinal plants they managed to cure every mysterious ailment or disease suffered by the villagers, in particular the ever-complaining old women. It was with good reason that the people regarded them as witches.

After these searches they were always in high spirits, full of fun and ribaldry, as if they had not been walking in the heat and dryness, over parched, barren ground among bare mountains, but had spent the afternoon in a male brothel.

And Mamourra would come back from every visit with some kind of herb or an amulet. ‘Have your husband eat this or wear this,’ they would say, ‘and the night will become a harem of pleasure for you. If it doesn’t help, just come back.’ Then Mamourra said goodbye and walked down the hill. When she reached the fig tree that grew on the patch of ground that had been passed down through generations of Baba Balooks, she looked to see if the fruits were already ripening and then walked up another hill to their house. The evening was covered in yellow dust. Night fell, and on the square she saw the glow of a fire.

This time it was not demons or fireflies. It was the villagers who had been summoned by the village elder to discuss what to do now that they knew of Baba Balook's intentions. The elder nodded incessantly, his cane resting against his chest like a granddaughter. The mosquitoes danced a fire dance. The stars twinkled. The boys who were present for the meeting had fallen asleep on their fathers' laps. Without anyone noticing, the assenting nods of some of the men gradually turned into the restless nodding of infants, or the elderly. After everyone had agreed to the plans, they stood up, gouty and creaky, and trudged home with the boys in their sleepy arms. There they lay on top of their wives (not everyone took the trouble to wake them first) and fertilised them at exactly the same moment, as if by pre-arranged signal; meanwhile Baba Balook was still busy with foreplay. The one exception was the desiccated village chief, whose libido was extinct. Moaning and sighing, he fell asleep beside his elderly wife, who slept like a rose bush.

The next day the boys began to ready themselves for their future responsibility by hurling abuse at their sisters, young and old, and beating them into the house. 'Go inside!' was the most frequently heard cry. The fathers looked on approvingly and stroked their bony walking sticks, with which they did little walking.

When Baba Balook left, the girls were miserable, all the women were four months pregnant and the boys had turned into monsters.

The day before his departure Baba Balook looked out over his fig trees in the Abqar Valley like a heron surveying his watery realm, like a sad king. The evening was yellow and blue and was modestly filled with the bells of his two scrawny goats, who chewed their cuds under the trees, in the company of the donkey. He walked down the hill to bid farewell to the goats, who impassively went on chewing their cuds even as he embraced them. He then took the donkey up the hill to give him some water. He paused once again and looked up at the hazy firmament. He had a lump in his throat and blinked rapidly.

Inside the house Mamourra had a chaotic and spirited conversation with Cheira and Heira, who were helping her prepare an elaborate dinner. She was a whirlwind of activity and laughed loudly and insincerely to drown out the ache in her poor heart. Cheira and Heira saw it all and sadly shook their heads. She avoided their looks and did not even glance up when Baba Balook stood in the doorway. They motioned for him to go away. Mamourra was facing away from them, but the sight of her heaving shoulders made them stop what they were doing and take her in their arms: her eyes were two waterfalls.

‘Hush your crying, dear heart. Hush now, moppet. It’ll be all right, honeycomb, it’ll be all right.’

They could always make her laugh with their strange words and weird pet names, and this time was no exception. She laughed through her tears, but as often happens in such cases, she wept even more fiercely afterwards. It broke their hearts. A lizard observed their activities. After an elaborate meal and an elaborate farewell in the open courtyard, Cheira and Heira left. Baba Balook and Mamourra watched them as they waddled down the hill in the moonlight. It was remarkable that there was no one outside and no sounds could be heard from any of the houses.

Following a night of unusually tender love-making – ‘hip sports’ was what Cheira and Heira called it – Mamourra found herself unable to get to sleep. Propped up on one elbow, she lay there, imbibing and devouring the slumbering profile of her husband with her eyes, which were nothing but glistening pupils. It was the first time they had made love completely naked; for the first time he had looked at her from all sides with admiration, and with admiration his hands had caressed her. She had cooed shamelessly; her skin tingled, and ripples ran down to her nether regions. She smiled blissfully because he had finally understood that she wanted to feel in her husband’s caresses that he thought she was beautiful and that he *saw* her, not just desired her: he had to fill his gaze with her forms and shadowy outlines as one would fill a basket, before grabbing her flanks with his strong hands. It was important that he knew the whole picture, before he melted

into a shared universe with her, in which the two of them were reduced to touch and saliva.

Her face now beamed with proud love, and her body was still dewy with rapture, but her lips and eyebrows grieved. He had fallen right to sleep: didn't Cheira and Heira have anything for afterplay? The owl, which had flown from the roof to the window sill, tried to say something, but did not get any further than the interrogative pronoun. Mamourra lay in a trance of tenderness which only women know, and the owl stuttered to the rhythm of her inscrutable heart. Now and then Baba Balook growled in his sleep and shook his head as if a mosquito were bothering him, but it was her fingers that caressed his face and scurried downward, stumbling over his collar bone on their way down to his navel. She now did something she had never done before: she touched his pizzle, which was sleeping soundly among the curls, a small fleshy aubergine: dark, shiny, and, especially recently, full of seed. It was endearing, knurled, as if every line represented a year, or the number of times she had received him. Beneath that the double knots of a willow. She was fascinated, and her heart began to race. The owl flew away.

Baba Balook smiled. In the distance frogs suddenly began to croak, only stopping when she withdrew her hand, startled. He rolled over onto one side. She laid her head on the pillow and closed her eyes to allow her heart, which had gradually gone from a trot to a gallop, to quieten down. She felt something dawning in her belly, and her legs grew weak, but she did not dare to wake him. The croaking started again, and it sounded like laughter; it made her think of Cheira and Heira's guffaws.

When he rolled onto his stomach, she began to touch his back, after waiting a while. She managed to suppress the urge to lie on top of him, an adult version of the way she used to climb onto her mother's back as a child. And it was like an energetic child that lust now played through her body. In despair she began to cry quietly, and the tears that fell onto his back, also fell in his dreams of Paravion, a green land, where the streams and rivers sparkled with incessant rain. He dreamt

he was floating on his back in that water, content and happy, with no work to do, but in the awareness of great luxury. Both banks lay in the shade of orchards, and the water was liquid diamond, in which peacocks were reflected. But all of a sudden, he began to sink since he realised he could not swim. Then he drifted back to the surface and noticed that a full bladder or swollen blood gave him an unpleasant sensation. He was blinded by tiny flashes of light; bunches of peeled fruits with glistening flesh swayed above his face. The water rippled loudly. The rain disturbed the surface of his dream.

He turned onto his back, and Mamourra carefully straddled him. Her fingertips searched for the hem of her nightdress, to lift it up, a routine gesture, but she immediately realised she was naked. A phantom sensation. Her hand clasped his life and enclosed it within firm labia.

Mamourra's face was a questioning grimace, an anticipation of pain rather than a sensation of pleasure; she held her breath. Her sideways-pointing breasts, apples of the moon which seemed to live independently of the rest of her upper body, bobbed up and down as her body convulsed in a pleasure that seemed to last forever, especially since she had to suppress a rising scream. Pink streaks from her tight brassiere were visible on her back and midriff – he had torn it off; he never seemed to get the knack of unhooking it gracefully – and her breasts sighed, their soft lychee-flesh swollen by the pregnancy.

Without waking him, she dismounted and lay down beside him. Her eyes were burning from all the crying, but found no peace. She had been fortunate that he had turned onto his back. The clamouring of the frogs, which had increased in volume, now stopped. Why do good things often come too late, she wondered before finally falling asleep.

Envy knows strange laws – just like laziness. The villagers had always despised Baba Balook and the retired life he led with his wife; he was not even aware of their contempt. But when they found out what he was planning, they were furious he had not told them. They saw this as his duty, and for them his secrecy was

betrayal. Communities like theirs do not care for independent-minded people, and their contempt nourished the malicious delight they took at his failures.

Mamourra's miscarriage had been the cause of much *Schadenfreude* (just imagine him reproducing), and strangely enough, the women, who were generally excluded from what was called 'men's business', shared these sentiments. No one spoke up for her. And they blamed him for showing no sympathy for their years of hardships which seemed to affect Baba Balook and Mamourra less than them. Did he really think he could leave on his own and abandon them to the drought and their fate?

The village chief shook his head in displeasure, as he always did when his wife announced her opinion before her turn or without his permission. Especially that time the carpet dealer had come to the village and she had wanted to get involved in the haggling – a man's business if ever there was one. He had sent her inside and apologised to the merchant, who looked scandalised, as if he had heard an owl talking. Shaking his head – this was one of the main activities of old men – he went on unrolling the rugs, mechanically praising their respective qualities. On the way back he thought about telling his friends at the teahouse about this incident: listen to what happened to me today, brothers...

The men around the fire shook their heads in concert and some of them clenched their fists. The bastard. Mamourra was spared their curses: as a woman she was irrelevant.

The couple's relationship with Cheira and Heira fostered more bad blood; the two women had always supplied them with fresh vegetable and herbs. Once they had even brought them pigeons and quail, and the smell of that sweet roast had made many a mouth water. No one who meddled in witchcraft should count on affection. The fact that the entire village was dependent on Cheira and Heira for the most basic things, medicine or spearmint tea, was forgotten in the heat of the moment.

In their eyes Baba Balook was ungrateful, not just because he was so aloof but also because he kept secrets from them. They expected some gratitude from him:

hadn't they tolerated his presence all this time? It was thanks to them that he had remained unharmed. Where was his sense of solidarity? Was he going to amass a fortune while their misery only increased? The dog.

Full of self-pity, the men muttered, singing their miserable fate. What could be done about it? Look for work perhaps, some might have said, go to the city or set off on a journey themselves, but no one said it, because no one thought it. There are people for whom patience or passivity is a sort of job in itself. It could even be tiring, as evidenced by the many sighs and groans uttered by the men. They had known busier times when they stood in the shadow of the blossoming almonds, lemons and olives in the rainy seasons, which now seemed so far away. From the shade the men would keep a close eye on the women, as they worked the land, hunched over, some carrying babies in slings on their backs, before eventually going home to do the housekeeping. The insects on the ground and in the air had just as busy an existence as the men's hands that shooed them off.

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The morning air was sonorous with the twittering of birds. Everyone had streamed out of their houses; the women stood in a row behind the boys, who, with proud chests and upturned chins, prevented them from taking a step, firmly holding the sticks their fathers had presented to them with much ceremony during the farewell ritual before going to sleep. Apart from the village chief, who stood in front, all the men were sitting on their vehicles. Feet dangled down, slippers wobbled on toes, hands waved, unfed mouths hung open, scrotums were shifted to the right place and enthusiastically scratched. Knapsacks served as pillows, since there was no reason why a journey should mean a change of posture. There is no stronger bond than the one between gravity and the flank of the ne'er-do-well. Curled lips smirked when the travellers saw a shattered Baba Balook standing there. This was their revenge, and it was as sweet as honey. They gave him no time to recover from his shock; they took off loudly, into a scream of yellow light that gave their silhouettes halos. Sunlight filled their open mouths, but bright as it was, it could not whiten their serrate yellow and brown teeth. The men flew straight into the lily fields of the dawn, in anticipation of Paravion's vertiginous embrace. Paravion called and beckoned, and they listened. Here we are! Here we are!

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Mamourra sank to the ground, her legs bent double beneath her, and hung her head, the very picture of despondency. But Baba Balook was not to be discouraged. With a mischievous grin and an arching of the eyebrows – watch this, my darling – he leapt on to his vehicle and took off. He glided past Mamourra, whose cheek he touched in a daredevil gesture. He revolved in the air and disappeared into the morning which had opened all windows. He became a black point that was swallowed up by what appeared to be a solitary cloud.

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husband's body, next to his inseparable cane. He would support himself on it whenever he had to make an extra effort to facilitate the release of a reluctant stool. A contented smile floated on his face like a crescent moon in a stream; the smile that comes with the first liberating push, which had evidently been fatal. His wife did not begin her wailing until she was done relieving herself.

Mamourra rose to her feet with dignity; the sun had dried her tears, and she slammed the door shut behind her with her feet. Oh, what buttocks! thought the village chief. Indeed: what had been a ludicrous movement when done by the other women, had in her case been a seductive display.

The cloud into which the travellers had disappeared slowly disintegrated into white flakes. No one saw that strange snow – not real snow, but countless white feathers tumbling from the sky – except a drowsy old shepherd under an olive tree on a distant plain, who thought they were almond or lemon blossoms, and a fisherman on Lake Narvel, who kept his nets and boat ready because he knew exactly what that feathery precipitation meant. The seasons are not what they once were, thought the shepherd, and he took his flute out of his shepherd's purse.

Not everyone had been able to wave farewell to the men. Fragile Senunu, six rainless springs old, was still sleeping on the sheepskin next to the sagging mattress of his parents, who had not wanted to wake him. He woke up early though, because unusual silence in a house can disturb sleep just the same as noise. He blinked, seeming to hesitate between the colours of his dreams, the red of which was still visible on his cheeks, and the dim light in the room, before eventually choosing the latter. He stood up quickly and ran outside where the crowd had gathered. He took hold of an anonymous hand – his sleepy head was a thistle of black prickles, which so endeared him to his mother. However when he noticed what was going on, he let go of the hand and began running after the men, first with a lump in his throat, then whimpering and finally bawling loudly. With all the strength that his little body could muster, his chin on his chest, his fists clenched, his thumbs up, his little belly sticking out, in his striped habit that

went down to his knees – he had literally grown up in it and had never worn anything else – he ran barefoot down the hill. The other boys laughed. He ran so fast that he could no longer stop without losing his balance, and in a cloud of dust he did just that, falling flat on his face. Crying and panting, he scrambled to his feet and walked back, eventually disappearing into the folds beneath his mother's belly, ashamed of himself. She dusted him off, laughing as she did so, and stroked his chin consolingly: your father will be back soon. The boys snorted scornfully at his blubbing: *pfff*, and this boy is supposed take over the task of a man?

With tear-bright eyes Senunu looked at where the morning had sunk. But what saddened him was not his father's departure – all that meant was fewer beatings – or that he had not been able to wave goodbye. No, he was one of those inexplicable boys who cannot stand being unable to overtake someone or having someone overtake them.

had seen the mountains grow up, I'll have you know, gentlemen), they looked good for their age. Their skin was almost as draped as their attire, which was typical of women in that country: pieces of fabric, one on top of the other, fastened together with the occasional button, forming pouches which could just have well have been droopy curves as bulging folds, with many loose stitches of imitation gold thread and on top of it all a shawl with wide stripes. They had more layers than an onion.

Their deep-set eyes with doleful lids were home to a lively light in grey-green irises. They were called 'nimble eyes', eyes that never missed a thing and betrayed a fondness for the obscene side of life. Thus they descended into peals of raucous laughter when they placed pomegranate flowers on their laps and showed them to Mamourra as an introduction to the anatomical mysteries of womanhood. The yellow powder from the stamens stuck to their fingers, and they laughed at the suggestive words that only women know, while Mamourra blushed with embarrassment, although that is hard to say for certain, because she was always blushing. They stroked her skin and fondled her lissom limbs with more sensuality than was good for her.

'We hope your husband knows his way around this satin flesh,' they said, neighing again with shrill laughter. They held her face by her lovely chinnikin – as they called it – and sighed at the sight of so much beauty, at the colourful palette of her eyes and mouth, an ibis curled up in the snow.

'Lend us your breasts, child. One is enough; you mustn't underestimate your mothers.' They tugged at them and petted her locks and hips.

And we needn't go into detail about all that they taught her with the help of figs.

'Enough already,' mumbled Mamourra.

They held her tight to their bountiful bosoms and laughed jubilantly. Their love for her rivalled that of a real mother. The way she had been lying there under that fig tree in Abqar, a gurgling little molecule of a person, a floundering droplet of the moon, green and yellow shadows playing over her pearly white body. She

gave off an intoxicating scent, her eyes big and happy with the heavens in the vaults of her eyelids.

Cheira and Heira were missing many of their teeth, and the few they did have were yellowish ivory. They spent the cool hours of the day looking for herbs and plants. Bickering, chattering and giggling like women at market, they searched cuminous valleys, gingery plains, and cinnamoniferous mountain passes. Even though it was an arid environment – the most common flora were cactuses, thistles and grey, dry olive trees – they always managed to come back with large quantities in the laps of their clothing. Bouquets of fresh and succulent plants, which were supposed to grow in regions with abundant water or near mountain streams or in fertile wadis: any region, in short, except the one they lived in. They gathered harmel, nightshade, baneberry, mandrake, poppy bulbs and ergots, and they sold parsley, lavender, rosemary, coriander and spearmint to the women, who searched for these plants in vain. With their medicinal plants they managed to cure every mysterious ailment or disease suffered by the villagers, in particular the ever-complaining old women. It was with good reason that the people regarded them as witches.

After these searches they were always in high spirits, full of fun and ribaldry, as if they had not been walking in the heat and dryness, over parched, barren ground among bare mountains, but had spent the afternoon in a male brothel.

And Mamourra would come back from every visit with some kind of herb or an amulet. ‘Have your husband eat this or wear this,’ they would say, ‘and the night will become a harem of pleasure for you. If it doesn’t help, just come back.’ Then Mamourra said goodbye and walked down the hill. When she reached the fig tree that grew on the patch of ground that had been passed down through generations of Baba Balooks, she looked to see if the fruits were already ripening and then walked up another hill to their house. The evening was covered in yellow dust. Night fell, and on the square she saw the glow of a fire.

This time it was not demons or fireflies. It was the villagers who had been summoned by the village elder to discuss what to do now that they knew of Baba Balook's intentions. The elder nodded incessantly, his cane resting against his chest like a granddaughter. The mosquitoes danced a fire dance. The stars twinkled. The boys who were present for the meeting had fallen asleep on their fathers' laps. Without anyone noticing, the assenting nods of some of the men gradually turned into the restless nodding of infants, or the elderly. After everyone had agreed to the plans, they stood up, gouty and creaky, and trudged home with the boys in their sleepy arms. There they lay on top of their wives (not everyone took the trouble to wake them first) and fertilised them at exactly the same moment, as if by pre-arranged signal; meanwhile Baba Balook was still busy with foreplay. The one exception was the desiccated village chief, whose libido was extinct. Moaning and sighing, he fell asleep beside his elderly wife, who slept like a rose bush.

The next day the boys began to ready themselves for their future responsibility by hurling abuse at their sisters, young and old, and beating them into the house. 'Go inside!' was the most frequently heard cry. The fathers looked on approvingly and stroked their bony walking sticks, with which they did little walking.

When Baba Balook left, the girls were miserable, all the women were four months pregnant and the boys had turned into monsters.

The day before his departure Baba Balook looked out over his fig trees in the Abqar Valley like a heron surveying his watery realm, like a sad king. The evening was yellow and blue and was modestly filled with the bells of his two scrawny goats, who chewed their cuds under the trees, in the company of the donkey. He walked down the hill to bid farewell to the goats, who impassively went on chewing their cuds even as he embraced them. He then took the donkey up the hill to give him some water. He paused once again and looked up at the hazy firmament. He had a lump in his throat and blinked rapidly.

Inside the house Mamourra had a chaotic and spirited conversation with Cheira and Heira, who were helping her prepare an elaborate dinner. She was a whirlwind of activity and laughed loudly and insincerely to drown out the ache in her poor heart. Cheira and Heira saw it all and sadly shook their heads. She avoided their looks and did not even glance up when Baba Balook stood in the doorway. They motioned for him to go away. Mamourra was facing away from them, but the sight of her heaving shoulders made them stop what they were doing and take her in their arms: her eyes were two waterfalls.

‘Hush your crying, dear heart. Hush now, moppet. It’ll be all right, honeycomb, it’ll be all right.’

They could always make her laugh with their strange words and weird pet names, and this time was no exception. She laughed through her tears, but as often happens in such cases, she wept even more fiercely afterwards. It broke their hearts. A lizard observed their activities. After an elaborate meal and an elaborate farewell in the open courtyard, Cheira and Heira left. Baba Balook and Mamourra watched them as they waddled down the hill in the moonlight. It was remarkable that there was no one outside and no sounds could be heard from any of the houses.

Following a night of unusually tender love-making – ‘hip sports’ was what Cheira and Heira called it – Mamourra found herself unable to get to sleep. Propped up on one elbow, she lay there, imbibing and devouring the slumbering profile of her husband with her eyes, which were nothing but glistening pupils. It was the first time they had made love completely naked; for the first time he had looked at her from all sides with admiration, and with admiration his hands had caressed her. She had cooed shamelessly; her skin tingled, and ripples ran down to her nether regions. She smiled blissfully because he had finally understood that she wanted to feel in her husband’s caresses that he thought she was beautiful and that he *saw* her, not just desired her: he had to fill his gaze with her forms and shadowy outlines as one would fill a basket, before grabbing her flanks with his strong hands. It was important that he knew the whole picture, before he melted

into a shared universe with her, in which the two of them were reduced to touch and saliva.

Her face now beamed with proud love, and her body was still dewy with rapture, but her lips and eyebrows grieved. He had fallen right to sleep: didn't Cheira and Heira have anything for afterplay? The owl, which had flown from the roof to the window sill, tried to say something, but did not get any further than the interrogative pronoun. Mamourra lay in a trance of tenderness which only women know, and the owl stuttered to the rhythm of her inscrutable heart. Now and then Baba Balook growled in his sleep and shook his head as if a mosquito were bothering him, but it was her fingers that caressed his face and scurried downward, stumbling over his collar bone on their way down to his navel. She now did something she had never done before: she touched his pizzle, which was sleeping soundly among the curls, a small fleshy aubergine: dark, shiny, and, especially recently, full of seed. It was endearing, knurled, as if every line represented a year, or the number of times she had received him. Beneath that the double knots of a willow. She was fascinated, and her heart began to race. The owl flew away.

Baba Balook smiled. In the distance frogs suddenly began to croak, only stopping when she withdrew her hand, startled. He rolled over onto one side. She laid her head on the pillow and closed her eyes to allow her heart, which had gradually gone from a trot to a gallop, to quieten down. She felt something dawning in her belly, and her legs grew weak, but she did not dare to wake him. The croaking started again, and it sounded like laughter; it made her think of Cheira and Heira's guffaws.

When he rolled onto his stomach, she began to touch his back, after waiting a while. She managed to suppress the urge to lie on top of him, an adult version of the way she used to climb onto her mother's back as a child. And it was like an energetic child that lust now played through her body. In despair she began to cry quietly, and the tears that fell onto his back, also fell in his dreams of Paravion, a green land, where the streams and rivers sparkled with incessant rain. He dreamt

he was floating on his back in that water, content and happy, with no work to do, but in the awareness of great luxury. Both banks lay in the shade of orchards, and the water was liquid diamond, in which peacocks were reflected. But all of a sudden, he began to sink since he realised he could not swim. Then he drifted back to the surface and noticed that a full bladder or swollen blood gave him an unpleasant sensation. He was blinded by tiny flashes of light; bunches of peeled fruits with glistening flesh swayed above his face. The water rippled loudly. The rain disturbed the surface of his dream.

He turned onto his back, and Mamourra carefully straddled him. Her fingertips searched for the hem of her nightdress, to lift it up, a routine gesture, but she immediately realised she was naked. A phantom sensation. Her hand clasped his life and enclosed it within firm labia.

Mamourra's face was a questioning grimace, an anticipation of pain rather than a sensation of pleasure; she held her breath. Her sideways-pointing breasts, apples of the moon which seemed to live independently of the rest of her upper body, bobbed up and down as her body convulsed in a pleasure that seemed to last forever, especially since she had to suppress a rising scream. Pink streaks from her tight brassiere were visible on her back and midriff – he had torn it off; he never seemed to get the knack of unhooking it gracefully – and her breasts sighed, their soft lychee-flesh swollen by the pregnancy.

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husband's body, next to his inseparable cane. He would support himself on it whenever he had to make an extra effort to facilitate the release of a reluctant stool. A contented smile floated on his face like a crescent moon in a stream; the smile that comes with the first liberating push, which had evidently been fatal. His wife did not begin her wailing until she was done relieving herself.

Mamourra rose to her feet with dignity; the sun had dried her tears, and she slammed the door shut behind her with her feet. Oh, what buttocks! thought the village chief. Indeed: what had been a ludicrous movement when done by the other women, had in her case been a seductive display.

The cloud into which the travellers had disappeared slowly disintegrated into white flakes. No one saw that strange snow – not real snow, but countless white feathers tumbling from the sky – except a drowsy old shepherd under an olive tree on a distant plain, who thought they were almond or lemon blossoms, and a fisherman on Lake Narvel, who kept his nets and boat ready because he knew exactly what that feathery precipitation meant. The seasons are not what they once were, thought the shepherd, and he took his flute out of his shepherd's purse.

Not everyone had been able to wave farewell to the men. Fragile Senunu, six rainless springs old, was still sleeping on the sheepskin next to the sagging mattress of his parents, who had not wanted to wake him. He woke up early though, because unusual silence in a house can disturb sleep just the same as noise. He blinked, seeming to hesitate between the colours of his dreams, the red of which was still visible on his cheeks, and the dim light in the room, before eventually choosing the latter. He stood up quickly and ran outside where the crowd had gathered. He took hold of an anonymous hand – his sleepy head was a thistle of black prickles, which so endeared him to his mother. However when he noticed what was going on, he let go of the hand and began running after the men, first with a lump in his throat, then whimpering and finally bawling loudly. With all the strength that his little body could muster, his chin on his chest, his fists clenched, his thumbs up, his little belly sticking out, in his striped habit that

went down to his knees – he had literally grown up in it and had never worn anything else – he ran barefoot down the hill. The other boys laughed. He ran so fast that he could no longer stop without losing his balance, and in a cloud of dust he did just that, falling flat on his face. Crying and panting, he scrambled to his feet and walked back, eventually disappearing into the folds beneath his mother's belly, ashamed of himself. She dusted him off, laughing as she did so, and stroked his chin consolingly: your father will be back soon. The boys snorted scornfully at his blubbing: *pfff*, and this boy is supposed take over the task of a man?

With tear-bright eyes Senunu looked at where the morning had sunk. But what saddened him was not his father's departure – all that meant was fewer beatings – or that he had not been able to wave goodbye. No, he was one of those inexplicable boys who cannot stand being unable to overtake someone or having someone overtake them.