A Last Glass of Tea and Other Stories

Mohamed El-Bisatie

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Translated by
Denys Johnson-Davies

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Translator's Introduction

Denys Johnson-Davies

Ever since Mahmoud Teymour pioneered the short story in the 1930s and 1940s, Egypt has produced a number of writers who have practiced the genre with distinction, most recently Yahya Taher Abdullah, Yusuf Idris, and Yahya Hakki. Of those alive today there remain but few writers of real talent exercising this favored form of writing in the Arab world, and of these few, one whose work demands to be made known in the West is Mohamed El-Bisatie.

He was born in the Nile Delta in a small town overlooking the large salt lake of Manzala, and it is this area that he has made the canvas for almost all his writings, which include six volumes of short stories, the first published in 1968, and four novellas. His adult life has been lived in Cairo, except for a spell of five years in Saudi Arabia. Though in the intervening years he has felt no need to renew his acquaintance with his birthplace, it continues to be vividly etched in his imagination and remains the venue for these stories.

Highly regarded by critics and fellow writers in Cairo, El-Bisatie is a "writer's writer"—which is to say a writer who makes no concessions to the lazy reader. El-Bisatie stands back from his canvas and sketches his characters and events with a studied detachment. While there is drama in his stories it is never highlighted: the menace

lurks almost unseen between the lines. The characters depicted in his stories are for the most part peasants and farmers or petty officials and shopkeepers; the general atmosphere is one of sparseness, and the ever-present dryness of the surroundings is echoed in the life of the protagonists. There is only the occasional passing reference to some historical event—such as Nasser's revolution in "A Weak Light Revealing Nothing" or Sadat's journey to Israel in "A Conversation at Night"—to indicate the time in which the stories are set. Historical events are not a part of the narratives; they occur off-stage and do not impinge on the lives of these villagers. The cold camera lens that is trained on the life events of these stories is equally matter-of-fact where death has a part, as for instance in the stark, steady tread of "Drought," and in the detachment of "The Hill," where the fate of the woman is merely a part of nature's intrusion, no more dramatic than the way in which the sea forms rock pools. The story "Death Has Its Time," with its extension "The Floating Sack," begins with the bald statement that the inhabitants of the lane know that a girl will be murdered that night. The effect of the story is in no way diminished by this knowledge of the ending at the start.

El-Bisatie writes with unrivaled authenticity of village life in a particular area of Egypt. Most important, though, he writes stories that are universal in their appeal.

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The Wastelands

Our village looks over the lake. We are separated from it by vast tracts of wasteland covered by a fine layer of brittle salt, cane reeds that quickly wither, and thorn bushes that get tangled up into vast balls that are plucked up by the winds and thrown about ceaselessly until they end up in tatters in the streets of the village.

The wastelands have remained desolate throughout the years. When we were young we would run over there in our venturing to discover unknown lands. We would not go far away: all too soon we would be scorched by the blazing sun and the salt-filled wind. And today too we see the boys exploring over there.

Sometimes the gypsies come at the seasons of their migration. They set up their tents somewhere in the middle of the wastelands. After spending as long as they want there they then go off, unseen by anyone.

The buildings of our village were spreading out in the other direction, in the direction of the river.

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The people of our village don't care for fishing: they've never shown any enthusiasm for it. They had their trades which had been passed down to them and which, though they provided little profit, were sufficient for them.

The fishermen would come to our lake from the neighboring villages. We would see them in the middle of the night, the fishing nets on their backs covered over with canvas. They would stop at the shops to buy matches and tobacco.

They would not show themselves to be in any hurry. They would turn their faces away from the bright light of the pressure-lamp and would sometimes sit beside the café that was still open and which looked onto the bridge, before crossing it into the darkness of the wastelands—drinking glasses of tea, then going off.

The villagers would await their return in the morning at the bridge, buying from the catch they had brought, and the fishermen would wash in the waters of the river, wash their baskets and nets, and depart.

Eventually they set up small huts of reed canes on the shore. They would leave their things there until they returned. When there was a run of fish their women and children would follow them, and they would spend days over there continuously fishing, with their women carrying the catch to the village, where the merchants would be waiting on the bridge.

They also used to get into fights. Those last hours when the run of fish began to wear off—we too awaited that time with great wariness. All too soon news of the fighting would reach us: fishermen from one neighboring village with fishermen from another. We would see one of them winding a rag round his injured head as he came from the wastelands and rushed to the station to leave the village. Then we would see them—the strangers—descending from the train and moving to the village like a small dark cloud. Among them were women dressed in black, and men holding sticks, and a man in a clean gallabia with a white shawl round his neck who walked in front of them and hired the horse carriage and the two donkey carts, while the others stood to one side, looking around at one another as they waited for him. Then they would go off with their carts to the wastelands.

We would see them when they returned, generally at the beginning of the night. The man with the white shawl—riding in the horse carriage with the women—and behind him a donkey cart strewn with wet grasses where the

wounded, covered over with the black outer garments of the women, would be stretched out. We would walk alongside the cart, staring into the eyes of the wounded. We would, however, soon beat a retreat on hearing the angry remonstrations issuing from the last carriage. Then we would see them—the families of the wounded from the other village—getting down from the train and hiring carts and going off to the wastelands.

Sometimes the two groups would come at the same time, and it would seem as though each were avoiding the other. One of them would take its time in walking so that the other could hire its carts and go off, each one taking a track amid the wastelands. They never engaged in battle while they were transporting their wounded. We would wait at the bridge until they all returned from the lake, then we would go off to our homes. During those days it was dangerous to go near the wastelands, as each of the two groups would be lying in wait for the other. We wouldn't see them when they came or went, but we were always aware of them over there. Somehow or other they would have crept in and would be hiding in the hollows or among the reeds.

No one of us has anything to do with fishing. The men and the women, all dressed in black, still come from one day to another. They hire carts and go off to the wastelands, then return with their wounded. The others come after them.

Generally we leave our houses when the sun's heat abates. We walk about and pay visits and do our shopping. We stop for a while at the bridge, where we gaze at the wastelands, those vast tracts over which reign silence and stillness, the horizon aglow with the light of sunset.

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Once again the fish are in abundance along the shoreline and a coldish wind blows onto the village. Green grass has begun to sprout, scattered over the verges of the wastelands. Spatterings of rain catch up with the dust storms that gather in their path to the village.

We see the fishermen walking once again with their nets. They seem to have stopped their quarreling. Crouched alongside the café, they are drinking tea and looking at us with sleepy eyes. When one of them finishes his glass of tea, he places it by the wall, takes up his net and goes off. Always they are silent. And when they are walking along the road on their way to the wastelands they look as though they see no one.

All too soon the fighting between them would break out and once again our doors would be closed after the evening prayer. Sometimes the fighting would advance right up to within the boundaries of the village. We would hear the sound of intermittent rifle fire drawing nearer, then the shots would be echoing right in front of the houses. Each time it would appear that this was their decisive battle. There were screaming women in the streets, hurrying feet, stifled cries, and the sound of sticks exchanging blows under the windows, then silence would reign. We would hear the sound of carts being dragged from behind the houses.

In the morning it would look as if nothing had happened. We would see the café in the market with its windows smashed, and the broken chairs in the square, and bits of sticks and drops of blood that hadn't dried.

And the boys would be happily searching around for empty cartridges.

At the Roadside

The shack stood at the entrance to the village alongside the road that led to the settlements. It had always been there, ever since we were boys climbing the trees around it. Those coming from the settlements would sit in its shade drinking tea and resting their tired feet before entering the village. And before setting off on their journey back to the settlements, they would stay there for a while as they searched around for some animal to ride or for some companion with whom to chat on the way.

Its owner was a skinny old man who would come early in the morning, making his way through the fields, followed by one of his grandsons, who would spread a mat on the stone bench in front of the shack, sprinkle some water around it, and wash the cups and the teapot in the canal. The old man kept a single sound wooden chair, which he would bring to the outside of the shack whenever some well-bred person arrived. If it was a woman, she would invariably disappear from sight behind the shack, wrapped in her black garment as she waited for a horse-carriage going in the direction of the settlements.

Beside the shack were some palm trunks thrown down by the side of the road. On market days the old man would spread sacks over them.

At night he would light a fire and sit beside it, fighting off sleep.

After evening prayers the village men would come. They liked to walk along the dirt road after a substantial supper, and would discharge their ringing laughs and ribald jokes

into the darkness. Finally they would gather around the shack, spread out on the palm trunks. The old man would make tea as he listened to their noisy conversation. He would laugh silently and shake his head.

It was after the evening prayers, too, that the patrolmen would come. They did not have a fixed time and the week might pass without them coming anywhere near the village, then they would put in an appearance on two consecutive nights. They would enter the village by the weighbridge road where, after sunset, there were few travelers, and they would walk alongside the canal, then make a stop at the shack, when the old man would get to his feet, drying his eyes that were watering from the smoke. Silence would reign, and the men who had been leaping about on the track would go back to the palm trunks. They would cough breathlessly and begin to dry their sweat. They had heard much about the rough way the patrol officer treated even the important men. He would stand in front of the fire, his round white face taking on the colors reflected from the flames, staring into them with his sleepy eyes and licking the ends of his mustache. That habit of his, too, they had heard about. Behind him could be seen the heads of the horses as they grazed on the grasses at the roadside. The men would get up and brush the dust from their white gallabias. From the long yawns they gave it would be apparent that they were feeling tired and wanted to go to sleep, and they'd walk off arm in arm to the village.

The old man would carry the chair to the back of the shack and give a prod to his grandson sleeping inside. He would drag the woolen wrap off him and spread it on the stone bench. He would tie up the horses and bring them water from the canal, then seat himself by the fire to make tea. The soldiers paid nothing: they would drink as much tea as they liked and go off in peace. They would relax on the stone bench and he would bring them the water-pipe, laughing and saying, as he pressed down with his finger on the small live coals, "You've got a long journey."

He took a glass of tea to the officer behind the shack, and the officer motioned him away. The old man said, "The glass is clean."

The officer again motioned to him to move away. He stood beside the chair with his hands behind his back, the stick covered with thin strips of leather under his arm. Each time he came he would stand in the same place, staring toward the fields that stretched away and the lights of the settlements that seemed from afar to be scattered in an uneven arc. From here things seemed clear: it could only be them. From its lights, the fishermen's settlement looks to be the nearest one to the district administration office, with only the lake between them. And yet when he went there with his horsemen it would prove to be the furthest away. How easily they could get to the district office and back in their boats! Who could catch them on the lake? Had the commissioner of police granted his request to set up a control center behind the district office and provide it with a force of several armed boats, the matter would have been resolved. The commissioner had shouted, "Launches with machine guns? Shall I tell them we can't catch a few cattle-thieves?"

Each time he would say that this time they wouldn't get away, and always they would choose the right time, just when the bales of cotton were waiting for the carts and the baskets of peaches were all stacked up near the gate of the Inspectorate, the maize and the wheat too.

Perhaps they hide the animals on the islands that are scattered throughout the lake. Or perhaps they handed them over immediately to one of the merchants. But those sacks that they fill with oranges and guavas, how is it he finds no trace of them at the settlement? He searches the houses one by one, the flat roofs and the baking ovens. He follows them directly after the raid, telling himself they wouldn't have time to hide what they have stolen. If only he had some boats he would catch them on the lake. However, each time he would ride along the dirt roads, passing by villages and

settlements, in a hopelessly wide detour, there being no other road suitable for the horses.

Sometimes he would go after them two or three days after the raid, thinking they may have relaxed and removed their spoils or brought them from the islands. Each time he would sense that they were waiting for him. The settlement would appear to be empty, the houses shut and the lights turned off—even the shop that was like a crevice in the wall. He would sense their presence behind the doors watching him, and he would tremble with rage and strike at the doors with his foot. Those silently dumb faces. No one. That's how it was: the men were away fishing on the lake. Always fishing. No one but some old people on the heaps of straw in the houses, staring at him and getting to their feet.

"How do you know they're from the fishermen's settlement?" the superintendent would ask.

If only he had come and stood here and looked at those lights.

He walks for a while behind the shack, striking with his stick at the tips of the crop at the edge of the field.

"Ah, they rob the Inspectorate!"

He listens to the coughing of the soldiers on the stone bench and their whispered conversation with the old man, as though exhausted by the long silence as they followed him.

When he felt the horses had rested, he appeared suddenly in front of the shack and made his way to his horse, and they set off for the settlements.

The old man stood beside the blazing fire listening to the thud of the horses' hooves and turned round and called out to his grandson crouching at the door of the shack. "Go to Hagg Fathi. Tell him they're coming."

The boy spun round and rushed off through the fields in the direction of the fishermen's settlement. There was no clearly defined way through the fields, though the people in the settlements, when in a hurry, found a way to the village between the plots of land and the canals. The