ENDINGS

by 'Abd al-Rahman Munif

translated by Roger Allen

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To the memory of Janet Lee Stevens, who first introduced me to this work.
—R.A.

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Translator's Introduction

The novel is a literary genre which throughout its history has taken as one of its primary topics the nature of modernity and the process of change. Bearing in mind the rapidity of its development in the post-industrial era, it should not surprise us that authors of this genre have focused their attention on the problems of the emerging middle class and, in particular, the life of the modern city. Perhaps one might suggest that novels have been and are written in the main by city dwellers about city dwellers for city dwellers, thus covering the author–text–reader triad favoured by much contemporary narratology. Novels set in the countryside are by comparison a rarer commodity, and particularly within the context of the Arabic novel. Novels set entirely in the desert are, I would suggest, almost unheard of; and therein lies the uniqueness of *Endings* by 'Abd al-Rahman Munif.

While the corpus of Arabic novels available in English translation is continually growing, it remains small by comparison with other world literature traditions. Furthermore the list has certain characteristics: the majority of novels are written by Egyptians, and they are set among the middle-class population in the capital cities of the Middle East. Both these features are, I hasten to add, a fair reflection of the tradition itself. By contrast, *Endings* is by a Saudi novelist; this may indeed be the first translation of a Saudi novel. 'Abd al-Rahman Munif was born in 1933. He has studied in Yugoslavia and France and holds a doctorate degree in petroleum economics. He currently lives in Boulogne on the Channel coast. For a time he lived in Iraq where he became a close colleague and friend of the great Palestinian *littérateur,* Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, who

Drought. Drought again!

When drought seasons come, things begin to change. Life and objects change. Humans change too, and no more so than in their moods! Deep down, melancholy feelings take root. They may seem fairly unobtrusive at first. But people will often get angry. When that happens, these feelings burst out into the open, assertive and unruly. They can appear in a number of guises. As clouds scurry past high in the sky, people look up with angry, defiant expressions. With the arrival of drought, no home is left unscathed. Everybody bears some kind of mental or physical scar.

During the course of their long lives the old people have witnessed many gruesome periods. As a result, they have long since become inured to years of fatigue and the pangs of hunger. Even so, the very thought of drought seasons can still fill them with forebodings. They are the only ones who face the prospect with such resolution. At first people persevere doggedly and manage to put aside small amounts of grain so as to provide some form of sustenance during times of drought. But these small stockpiles soon run out or simply dwindle away. It is the same with spring water and the stream. At this point a frantic search for daily bread gets underway; in the process anxieties and premonitions start rearing their ugly heads and turn into horrible spectres. The phenomenon can be seen in any number of different guises: expressions on children's faces; the glum looks displayed by the men and the curses they use; and the tears which women shed for no apparent reason.

Yes, drought is back again. Here it comes, pushing a whole

host of things ahead of it. No one can explain how these things coincide or happen to be there at all. Take peasants, for example. They would bring baskets of eggs to the edge of town; sometimes they would even venture into the centre where the markets are crowded with people. Then there were shepherds whose entire annual income would be based on the sale of a few lambs. They used to bring in their flocks at the beginning of spring carrying the tiny, newborn lambs on their chests to sell in town. And then there were the crafty vendors who would bring in grapes, figs and apples on their pack animals. They used to weigh things out on primitive scales with sets of weights made out of pieces of polished stone; at first they would always overcharge people for their wares. But when these people came into town during a drought season, they would all look strangely different. Their clothing would be torn and have an odd colouring. They used to look anxious and sad. The powerful voices they would normally use to advertise their wares seemed by now to have slithered back down their throats; in their place all you heard were garbled sounds. Sometimes the town shopkeepers would ply them with terse, abrupt questions. The vendors from outside the town would have to repeat what they had been saying. But it was not the vendors' faces that these town shopkeepers were watching; what they had their eyes on were their hands or rather the tiny purses which the vendors kept firmly tied to the hems of whatever clothing they were wearing on their heads or bodies. When these people came into town during drought, they did not have any eggs, fruit, olives or lambs to sell. Instead they would try to purchase as much flour and sugar as their scant resources would permit. That applies even to shepherds, who were always particularly impetuous. They would demand such inflated prices for their lambs that, if it proved necessary, they preferred to bring their animals back to town a second time. Even if they did not buy or sell anything, they never seemed the slightest bit worried. However during years of drought like this one, they too become tentative and ingratiating. They are afraid their old and weak animals will die of hunger and thirst at any moment and are very anxious to get rid of them as quickly as possible.

There were still other salesmen who used to come into town at different times of year, bringing whatever produce was in season at the time. Sometimes they would simply come to take a look around. When drought came, these people would not bring anything at all. They would look for all the world like a group of hedgehogs that had rolled themselves up into balls and buried everything underground.

If these were only the surface manifestations of the total situation, then no one would be particularly surprised. After all, the relationship between the town and its environs is a powerful and continuing one. When changes start occurring, no one can afford to make snap judgements. As it was, odd things did start happening. For example, merchants who had normally been willing to make small loans to peasants and accept repayment during the harvest season (with a generous amount of interest added on, of course) now began to adopt a new procedure. Initially at least this procedure seemed fraught with all kinds of stipulations and was accompanied by not a little reluctance on the merchants' part. Before long they stopped making loans altogether, maintaining, of course, that such regrettable decisions were occasioned by a variety of disputes and other factors. Those few money-lenders who were still willing to offer some kind of financial assistance refused point-blank to postpone repayment until the following season. They insisted on new terms: peasants were required to sign over large segments of the land they owned to the money-lenders and their sons. These money-lenders did make a token effort to show good will. In the process they made use of the entire repertoire of platitudes which creditors can always be relied on to produce on such occasions. Here is a small example: 'This world of ours is a matter of life and death. Man cannot even guarantee that he will still be alive at the end of the very day he is living. So how can he possibly make any arrangements for his children's lives once he is dead and gone?' Nor was that all. They went on to say things like: 'As God Almighty says in the Holy Quran: "When you contract a debt upon one another for a stated term, write it down, and let a writer write it down between you justly."' Some peasants countered this insistence on the part of the money-lenders with an even more stubborn

attitude. Initially at least they refused to have their land registered in this fashion. But before long they found themselves compelled to part with gold and silver heirlooms which had been collected and passed on through generations and to offer them as collateral for flour, sugar and a few yards of linen. Later on, some of them gave in and agreed to register their lands and orchards in accordance with the creditors' demands. But, with every deal that was signed, the prices for land in the village dropped, and that made the merchants even more reluctant to offer any help. They now refused to make any agreements which were not on their own terms and insisted that all the required procedures had to be carried out.

There are other things which come with drought. People are struck down by strange diseases, and death soon follows. Old people used to pass away out of sheer grief. With young people, it was distended stomachs at first, followed by jaundice and then total collapse. People became inured to the idea of death. It no longer managed to scare them as it usually did at other times, although it certainly did bring a number of sorrows and long-standing hatreds to the surface. When drought was at hand, a desperate premonition of impending disaster seemed to hover over every house and almost to burrow its insidious way into the bloodstream of every living creature. Even animals usually kept in paddocks or at the far end of orchards had an especially edgy and desperate look about them.

In years like this death and hunger were much in evidence and so were countless flocks of birds scurrying their way across the sky like so many fluffy clouds high in the heavens. They could be seen at all hours of the day and even in the dead of night. Without making the slightest sound they used to fly past high in the sky, almost as though they were heading for some far away and unfamiliar destination, maybe even death, without knowing either where it was or when they would get there. People would gaze forlornly at the birds, fondly wishing that they would fly closer to the ground or else come down for a short rest; then it might be possible to grab several of them and thus avoid the imminent threat of hunger. But, as it was, the birds continued their exhausting journey to some unknown destination. Everyone stared up at them with a sigh, waiting

for something to happen, but nothing ever did. Flocks of geese, cranes and dozens of other types of birds could be seen as they flew past on their relentless migration. From time to time sand grouse started to appear too. Peasants had long since come to realize that this latter species only leaves its desert habitat and flies in towards pastured land when hunger and thirst have finally reduced its stamina and the various desert oases and water cisterns scattered around the place no longer contain a single drop of water. Obeying a natural instinct for survival these birds too started to abandon their normal cautious ways. Peasants noticed them heading for any place where they stood a chance of finding some crumbs to eat or a few drops of water.

They witnessed the same tragedy repeated right before their very eyes. Peasants were used to waiting patiently and even to displaying a certain conservatism born of a pessimistic outlook. If anyone questioned them about the various seasons and farming, they replied that seasons did not merely imply rainfall but a lot of other things as well. If the questioner persisted, they would summarize the whole situation as follows: 'Whatever God provides for us and the birds leave behind, that's what the seasons mean.' Deep down they are actually afraid of everything; that is why they make such statements. When no rainfall comes in the month when it is supposed to, they start worrying. If it comes early, crops start growing and show about an inch or two above the ground. When that happens, they worry in case the dry period will be followed by heavy rains; then the ground will get saturated, unwanted grass will grow, and everything will be spoiled. Even when the rain comes in reasonable amounts, spaced out evenly and at the right time, they still fuss till the end of May when it suddenly gets much hotter and everything burns to a crisp. At that point their hopes are dashed, and promises have to be broken. Men may have been promising their wives new clothes; the younger men in the community have reached the age of puberty and are eager to get married, always assuming that the new season will bring good tidings with it. All such promises have to be postponed, and all because the 'heatwave' (that is what they call it) has arrived and put an end to their fondest hopes.

No one likes to recall drought seasons ... When it is

particularly severe and keeps recurring year after year, most people prefer death or killing; they may even move away rather than have to face this prolonged agony of waiting. Others are driven to a level of vindictiveness and cruelty which people find hard to credit; indeed the perpetrators of such cruelty can hardly believe their own behaviour when they recall it later on and in different circumstances. For, if a man cannot vent his spleen on clouds and Him who sends them, then victims of another type have to be found. Husbands who normally show a great deal of tolerance and never swear or take a sudden swipe at anyone seem quite ready to abandon their normal behaviour without the slightest sense of remorse. At the least provocation they hit out and scream bloody murder over the most insignificant things. People who usually manage to put up a merry and optimistic front will be abruptly transformed into bitter scrooges, something which shows in both their attitude and behaviour. Even the most devout people who normally consider everything brought by the heavens as a test for mankind soon fall prey to these symptoms. In fact, they start swearing and blaspheming much worse than anyone else, to such an extent that people who have known them for ages wonder to themselves how such seemingly devout people can keep such a staggering lexicon of curses and wicked thoughts stored up inside them.

This then was the way most people behaved during that long, cruel year. Needless to say, every village and town in this microcosm had its own particular features and way of life: special names, cemeteries, drunkards, lunatics, rivers and streams to provide drinking water, and wedding seasons after the harvest. The village of al-Tiba was no different. It too had its own particular life-style, its graveyard and its weddings. It had its fair share of lunatics too, but they were not always in evidence. They had a special, crazy presence of their own. Sometimes they would seem big and strong; at others they could be utterly stupid and weird. But, in spite of everything, people sometimes managed to forget all about them. Al-Tiba also had its share of weddings, joys and sorrows too. More often than not, the weddings came after the harvest. When there was no rain and the ground became parched, the sad times came.

Wedding ceremonies might involve just a few people and for a specific period of time, but when years of drought came around, the gloomy expressions were everywhere to be seen, and the feeling persisted for a long time.

As is the case with villages throughout the world, al-Tiba has things of which it is proud. In other contexts these things may not seem particularly significant or important. But, as far as al Tiba is concerned, they form a cross-section of those special features which set it apart from other hamlets and villages. They represent the result of the action of time and nature in all its cruelty, something which is not the case elsewhere. For example the inhabitants of other villages may have loud voices. Peasants will often have shrill, high-pitched voices. They talk a mile a minute and spice their chatter with proverbs and aphorisms. That is the way peasants are all over the place; it stems from sheer habit and the distances which separate people from each other in the fields, or else from the fact that they have to shout at some animals which go astray or others whose peculiar temperament takes them off to distant, unknown places; or it may even be due to the distance between houses and the gardens and orchards around them (in which a large variety of vegetables are grown). All these factors have combined to produce in the inhabitants of al-Tiba a particular kind of temperament. Many other factors could be cited as well. As a result, people in al-Tiba have a particular way of talking. Someone hearing them speak for the first time without being aware of the way they are and how they relate to each other might imagine they were squabbling or that a dispute had turned so nasty that something terrible was about to happen.

If this was all that was involved, it would not be terribly significant, particularly as far as it concerns peasants and those who understand their temperament. However these characteristics are accompanied by a special narrative technique which

is the stock-in-trade of the people of al-Tiba. They will often meander away from the main topic and indulge in reminiscences. When they are telling stories culled from history, they milk the situation for all it is worth. If it were not for this trait, their special temperament would not be obvious at all, nor would the ever-present anxiety which characterizes everyone who lives in this village and others around it. Actually the trait may even reach as far as the city itself or at least some of its outer suburbs.

The people in al-Tiba know how to turn a story in that incredible way which makes everything seem to be of primary importance. This talent is passed on from father to son. As a result, in other people's eyes they come to seem special and even manage to persuade and exert some influence. This phenomenon cannot be explained away by suggesting that the whole thing is actually some kind of trickery or even flattery, or that it shows a malicious streak. It is quite simply a habit, and one that is subject to endless repetition.

There were those long nights when people would gather round and tell each other tales. These would go on and on. Challenges would be issued, and competitions would follow. All this would take place on summer and winter nights, in barns, alongside the village spring or clustered around braziers. The stories would all be fast-paced and effective, as close to a dream-world as one could imagine. People who were not good enough to participate in these story-telling sessions became totally different as soon as they found themselves among other people. They would retell the stories they had first heard in al-Tiba and embellish them with all the novel elements of fantasy their hearts desired. The resulting stories seemed so clever and skilful that they aroused as much admiration as envy.

Everyone who is born in al-Tiba, young or old, is a good listener. Actually in some unique way the younger ones may be even more gifted in this regard than their elders. They will repeat everything they have heard many, many times, either to each other or else to themselves. As a result everything gets recorded in people's memories; nothing is ever forgotten. To this store of information are added ideas and maxims which

either crop up on the spur of the moment or else are dictated by the needs of urgent situations which people often have to face. Occasionally they will resort to this mental archive of theirs, but the stories which emerge always manage to sound exciting and important.

Al Tiba relies for its livelihood on rain and agriculture and the thin strip of land which is irrigated by the spring. It's hardly surprising then that people always feel uneasy at the thought of the advent of years of drought. They make the most intensive preparations for such an eventuality by keeping a cow or two in every household or else a number of sheep. When the drought actually does come, they cannot even feed their own children, let alone animals. They proceed to unload a lot of their animal wealth on to shepherds and try to get rid of their remaining beasts by either slaughtering them or selling them off. There are actually fewer shepherds in al-Tiba than in a number of other villages, but they are skilful enough to be the envy of many people. A shepherd who is able to take the sheep of ten households out to pasture and knows what to do in the various seasons and where to take the animals will suddenly reappear during years of drought, even though he may have been out in the desert for a long time. He now has a particular hold over the owners of these sheep: he can sleep and reside in any house he likes without feeling the slightest bit shy or diffident. Shepherds like these have hidden talents which are not normally seen during good seasons. However, when drought comes, they become evident. The shepherds camp on the outskirts of the village. Some of them concentrate on hunting, but that does not make them lose the habits they have acquired as shepherds. People in al-Tiba have a truly remarkable knack for story-telling. They soon realize that these shepherds have lost the knack because they have been spending so much time with animals far out in the desert wastes. On the other hand, they are well aware that shepherds learn to deal with these prolonged periods of silence by singing wonderful songs. They accompany themselves on wooden instruments, and that is something which no one else can do really well. They even perform regularly at weddings and harvest festivals and on sad occasions too.

This is why shepherds become so indispensable during drought seasons and also because they know the places where animals are to be found. In general they are not very good at hunting, and no love is lost between them and real hunters. Shepherds are forever singing and playing those 'hellish' instruments (that is what the old people like to call them). They love showing off whenever possible, and never more so than when people are gathered together and some sort of performance is called for.

The village of al-Tiba marks the beginning of the desert proper. To the East are the orchards, the spring and then the market-place. The horizon marks the beginning of a chain of mountains. To the North and West broad plains stretch away into the distance interrupted once in a while by hills. These are sown with a wide variety of cereals and are also used to grow wheat, barley, vetch, clover and certain kinds of herbs. Close to the village itself vegetable greenery starts cropping up near the fruit trees. To the South the terrain becomes gradually more and more barren; the soil is flecked with outcrops of limestone chips. Bit by bit it changes. By the horizon it has turned into sand dunes, and then the desert itself starts. When the climate is good, al-Tiba is verdant and bursts into bloom on all sides. At the beginning of spring it is a riot of roses and other plants of all shapes and colours. Even the South side which seems so cruel and forbidding towards the end of summer manages to produce its own treasures from the bowels of the earth. People are at a loss to explain how all this can happen and how families in al-Tiba feel constrained at the beginning of spring to go out and pick all the incredible fruits which have till then remained buried beneath the ground. This entire festival season brings back memories of days of old when life was even more splendid and fruitful.

This particular village is marked by qualities and features which are not similarly bestowed on other villages around it. Even shepherds who have been given the responsibility of finding good pasturage will not venture close to al-Tiba's

grazing grounds or traverse a fixed borderline. They know full well what the people in al-Tiba are like, the kind of temper which is their hallmark, and the stupid things they are liable to do if a stranger infringes on their means of sustenance or life style.

People who live in al-Tiba know all about such things; in fact they constitute the villagers' trademark. Those who have to deal with them are also well aware of these traits. There are some villages which manage to produce many sons from their corporate belly, send them out all over the place and then lose track of them. With al-Tiba the whole thing is completely different. The village manages to engender in its children a kind of nostalgia which can never be forgotten. Even people who travel a lot and go far away never miss any opportunity to mention the village's name. They always hanker after the good old days and long to return to spend their final days there. Those who do not regard it in quite that light still think seriously about going back from time to time. They will spend a few days there having a wonderful time and reminiscing about things which happened in days of yore. They walk past every single house, sit in the market cafe and the other cafe by the spring, and take great gulps of the air, hoping that it will give them all the strength they need to face the future and persevere with that new life which they have begun elsewhere.

There were times when people liked to reminisce about the good old days. But the hard times also had a particular fascination of their own. Memory managed to turn even the greatest hardships into an odd type of heroism; so much so that people found it difficult to believe that they had actually managed to put up with everything and still carry on!

This sense of loyalty which people in al-Tiba feel towards their village home is not restricted to any one aspect nor indeed to the people who live there. People who leave the village to earn a living or to study elsewhere and who live in faraway places are not content simply to send home flour, sugar, letters and a few other items; they come back and spend a good deal of time there, especially when they fail to convince their relatives in the village to come and live with them in their new place of residence. The time they spend back in al-Tiba causes them a

good deal of sorrow; that much is undeniably true. They cannot hide the sadness they feel, particularly when they notice that there is only a trickle of water from the spring and that the stream has run dry. They hear the sound of axes smashing into the trunks of dessicated trees, and the whole thing makes them feel as though they are the ones being throttled. Add to all this the tales of people who have moved away and been separated from friends and relatives, young and old, and the melancholy feelings of the returnees turn into a touch of nerves. The conversation takes a new tack: they start blaming and criticizing the old people, even though they themselves are much younger.

'We've told you hundreds of times,' they yell at the old people, 'this land's only good for feeding rats. That's all. But you people keep hanging on here as though it's paradise on earth. Give it all up and move to the city! You'll find life there a thousand times better than it is here!'

Silence ensues. The people living in al-Tiba, especially the older ones, will stare sadly at the people speaking to them. For a few moments it may appear as though they have never set eyes on those faces before and do not recognize to whom they belong. At other times the old people get the impression that they are listening to someone else or that the city has managed to corrupt them completely and made them talk that way.

The old people have an endless stream of pictures running through their minds: memories of al-Tiba in a wide variety of times, good and bad; when grass used to grow on the rocks and roofs of houses; when springs used to burst out of the ground all over the place. They would breathe in deeply as they recalled all these details. It was as if they could sense the smell of fertility being fostered in all living things, not merely human beings, but animals and minerals too. They remembered everything, but most of all they recalled how wonderful the food used to taste; and would that set the saliva flowing!

The village children had long since left al-Tiba and settled in the city far away. Even so they did not really mean everything they said. It was not deliberately rude. The thing which induced them to say these things and even more to act as they did was the way the same problems kept recurring. But, in spite

of all the argument, the village offspring in their new homes kept mentioning al-Tiba. They would tell everyone what a fantastic village it was, unlike any other village in the entire region. Nor were they satisfied just to talk about the village. So strong was their sense of attachment that, on many occasions when nostalgia got the better of them, they would do the most unbelievable things. They would go back to the village to have their weddings and celebrate anniversaries. They used to send their sons there for the summer to spend some time living as they had done when they were young. And, when they themselves felt the urge, they would invite their friends to spend a few days in that wonderful region around al-Tiba.

'In al-Tiba the sky seems very close,' they would say, 'and it's as clear as can be. The nights bring their own thrill with them, something you can't match anywhere else in the whole world. When fresh fruit and dairy products are available, they're absolute heaven. Fresh skimmed butter, chicken, lamb cooked on a wood fire, all this and lots more besides; there's just nothing like the way they are in al-Tiba! And then there's the hunting! There's plenty of it to be had: partridge and rabbit, and even some wild species which have died out in most other places. All these and more you can find in the deep valleys around al-Tiba. There's lots of spring water to be had too. In years when the rainfall is plentiful, springs burst out through cracks in the ground and gush from under every rock. The water's cold and fresh; you can't drink enough of it!'

That is the way they would talk about the village. Whenever fruit from the village reached the city in small baskets, the village people who now lived there would keep turning it over again and again, just looking at it. They preferred offering it to guests and talking about it. Once in a while the conversation might turn to the subject of dairy products obtainable in the city, whereupon you would often see their expressions change. If you were quick off the mark, you might catch an expression which managed to combine disgust and nostalgia. For just a moment or two the impression would be left that the only food they could tolerate had to come from al-Tiba; nowhere else would do. A whole host of factors was at work in the hearts of both those who remained in the village and those who left. The

resulting mixture is so complicated that it is quite impossible to explain.

Like many other places al-Tiba has sandy soil and often runs out of water. However there is something else which serves as a powerful tie. On long summer nights when the old people start talking, they use a kind of language which has a great appeal for those who have come out from the city.

'Many years ago,' they would start, 'the mountains around al-Tiba were as green as orchards. But then the Turks started building the railway and running trains through. They did not leave a single tree standing. They needed the timber and did not care where it came from. When the time came for them to leave, they burned down trees in the inaccessible spots on the tops of mountains simply because they could not get at them to cut them down. Those mountains, which, as you can see, are stripped bare all the way out from the city to al-Tiba, used to be green when we were youngsters. Horsemen could get lost in the thick forests which used to fill the plains close to al-Tiba.'

Tales like these would evoke any number of images in people's minds. The children of al-Tiba (who had already heard them a hundred times) used to love coaxing the old people into telling them over and over again, especially when they were entertaining guests from the city. In some obscure way they seemed eager to identify the precise quality which set their home village apart. Even though that quality may not have been quite as obvious at that particular moment as they would have liked, it lay hidden just beneath the surface somewhere and was bound to show itself.

'There's nothing better,' they would add craftily, 'than to spend your last days in this blessed village.'

The very same cunning would be used to induce the old people to talk about their ages. Some of the men used to enjoy this sort of chatter, but it alarmed the women. They would interrupt the conversation; sometimes they got quite worked up about it. But no sooner had the talk taken a serious turn again than the old people would be telling people how clear the air was and how fresh the water; what a good idea it was to go to bed and wake up early; what kinds of food they liked to eat; how dreadful the new types of disease were; the sudden and early

death which seems to afflict life in the city; all things which they attributed to causes they had never encountered or heard of before.

Conversation in the evening would start quite spontaneously and without any pre-arrangement. It might be interspersed with a few innocent games. It would all happen on the spur of the moment with no prior planning. The process would include elaborate digressions. Things would always start with forests, trees, springs and so on. But then talk about periods of drought and the hardships the village had to face during those years would inevitably follow. Special feelings would be aroused by the sheer joy and pleasure which people felt during times of plenty when the ground was fertile, but the very mention of the hard times they lived through and survived would bring other sentiments rushing back, sentiments which overflowed with an assertive pride of a particular kind. Even children who had heard the stories over and over again would love to listen to them one more time; with every retelling they would sound fresh and packed full of heroic actions and lessons to be learned. 'We used to eat grass and plant roots,' the stories would go. 'We stooped to eating jerboas and even rats. Yes, they used to come into the village during drought years; in fact, they may have been the cause of such bad times. In those days that was the kind of thing we used to eat. Life was really tough, but men were men in those days: strong and hardy; they might even have eaten solid rocks! But the men today...!'

At this point some of the old people would smile. Others would reminisce. They would stare at each other and then glance at their children and lastly at their guests.

All this gives you some idea of what al-Tiba means to the people who are born there. When drought comes, everyone in the village feels a particular kind of sickness, and it makes no difference whether they are living there or far away. This sickness gradually becomes an obsession and then a nightmare. The villagers who now live far away need no prompting from anyone, if they can possibly afford it, to go back to the village.

But even such help as that is not enough to stave off the hardships and calamities which follow one another with alarming rapidity. The flow of water in the spring begins to slacken off, and the irrigation ditch slows down to a trickle and then dries up completely. The stream looks like a snake which has just died and is in the process of shedding its skin. Trees begin to droop and then dry up too. The apricot trees are the first to die, and others soon follow; walnut and olive crops are lost.

At such times al-Tiba looks brooding and ugly. Everything takes on a yellowish tinge. To the South there are no more truffles, mushrooms, sorrel, or a host of other types of fungi to be found. Indeed a whole series of sandstorms comes swirling in and covers everything in sight. The sky over the village is enveloped in a cloud of sickening dust. Swarms of flies and crows gather around the animal corpses and their droppings. People's voices turn into a muffled drone which bodes ill for everyone. In years such as this a number of people will certainly die, and many un-anticipated events occur.

Humans are not the only ones affected either. Animals and birds have a hard time too. Animals which cover a broad swathe of territory round the village will normally roam nonchalantly and lead a peaceful life. That makes them almost indifferent to the need for a full belly. But with the advent of drought they soon turn into totally different beasts: impetuous, restive and easily startled as they search for something to eat. Before long they turn into querulous and stubborn creatures, showing signs of temper and recalcitrance which can lead to actual harm. Eventually they become emaciated and sick. When that happens, their owners panic and try to get rid of them as soon as possible; they either slaughter them or else sell them off quickly. Birds used to traverse many a sky in search of sustenance. They had always continued on their way across the al-Tiba sky, almost as though, through some extraordinary process of heredity from ages past, some instinct deep down had taught them to pass over al-Tiba and go somewhere else. The only exception to this rule were the blasted desert birds which had such a vicious streak to them. They all seemed to abandon their normal category of haven in this world and head towards

al-Tiba and its environs. From there they would wage their eternal battle against mankind for the remnants of crops and the few remaining drops of water.

Every town, city and village has its own types of madness and madmen. The al-Tiba brand came in numerous categories and each was something special. In drought seasons these categories would appear in more profusion than ever. The predominant category (to the point of being virtually the only one) concerned hunting. Those people who did not have this particular hobby regarded it with sentiments ranging from sheer contempt to outright disapproval. In their eyes it was virtually a declaration of stupidity and sloth. However when drought came, even these people would suddenly discover within themselves a hidden and painful yearning to become hunters of one kind or another. The motivations would vary: they might want to have a guaranteed supply of food; or else their interest might be in getting rid of the predatory birds and giving vent to their desire for revenge. After all, there might still be some seeds left in the ground which would grow the following year, or at least those same seeds might manage to produce a few green leaves which the hungry animals could eat. These may have been some of the motives, but then again the real reason might have been the desire to take vengeance on some enemy or other.

This particular year the maniacs in al-Tiba were more numerous and vociferous than ever. Even during the year of the great famine which had immediately followed the war, they had never appeared in such numbers and circumstances. The hunting season was barely under way before they were all getting their ancient rifles out of closets, dusting them off and cleaning them carefully. Then the planning and talking started. Nor was that all. They started devising new hunting techniques and used their ingenuity to manufacture bullets to their own design. Some of these lunatics had suffered from this particular disease from a long time back. Now they resorted to low cunning in order to wreak revenge on the old times when they had been the butt of al-Tiba's sarcasm. They dangled the

temptations of hunting in front of everyone's eyes and convinced them all that this was the only way to save the community. Just to make sure their ploy would work, they distributed free ammunition which they themselves had manufactured in their own primitive way. Once they had people converted, they made use of them to prepare everything which would make their task easier.

'Nothing's simpler than hunting,' they would declare. 'To be a hunter, you have to practise; it's just like learning how to swim.'

At first, the people listening could not believe their ears. But gradually that hidden temptation worked its wiles and managed to suck many of them into the trap. Day by day more and more lunatics would join the group. These new conscripts would swell with pride whenever they shot down a bird. It only took a single day to turn them into zombies, people whose only idea of rest and relaxation was killing birds and chasing them hither and yon. That was how things got started. It was still fairly small-scaled and covert for the most part. Even so it managed to annoy many of the old people and those people who looked on hunting as a livelihood and a means of just staying alive.

In circumstances like these a better way of describing the sport is utter irresponsibility. It was certainly not something which men who appreciated their duties should have been doing. They should have been more concerned about the major problems which were becoming more acute every day. But the phenomenon kept growing. Those who at first seemed a little hesitant soon gave way, particularly when they saw dozens of grouse being brought in. When they turned the birds over to see how much flesh they had on them, they would voice their disappointment. 'Pretty poor,' they would say. 'Much worse than in previous years, that's for sure.' To prove a point, they would turn the birds over again and start squeezing the breasts. But these extra gestures and the pressure of their fingers on that fresh meat would bring about a change in their attitude too. They would start feeling tempted. With each new catch their diffidence would recede a little further. No words or pronouncements were to be heard, but each one of them made his own private decision to start hunting.

It was the same story with the old people. At first they kept yelling angrily at the hunters; the whole stupid thing they regarded as a kind of infatuation, certainly not something men should be involved in during a gruesome period of trial such as this. But even they relented before long. True enough, they did not do it either openly or quickly. But their opposition began to crumble and, as days went by, it dwindled away to nothing. Their comments now assumed a muted tone, something akin to advice:

'Why don't you go to the city and find work there? What's the point of gallivanting all over this dust-ridden area and wandering around the mountains and desert just to look for a few starving birds when they are all sinew and feathers in any case? It's all a big waste of time!'

The younger people would nod their heads to acknowledge that they had been listening, but the gesture implied neither agreement nor disagreement. In such contexts some of the old people would add a short postscript: 'When calamity strikes, it only comes once.'

And so the sport kept expanding in scope. The young men organized everything they needed for the next day's hunting. They would get ammunition ready, clean the guns and put pieces of coloured cloth filled with holes on sticks as lures for the birds. When the old people noticed what was going on and realized that the young people were not to be dissuaded, they changed their tone. Now their voices sounded more affectionate and scared as well:

'You should be more careful, you know. That bird-shot chews everything up, dead or alive.'

They watched the way the bullets were being put together to be sure the young men were not making mistakes. Once they had been reassured, they would repeat one particular phrase over and over again: 'That great maniac, 'Assaf. He's the one who's to blame for all this misery.'

Men and women, young and old, everyone in the village knew 'Assaf. Even so he was something of a mystery. People rarely

set eyes on him or had a chance to sit down and chat with him. He was between forty and fifty years old, tall, but with a slight stoop. He looked skinny but had a powerful physique. He was a bachelor, and people argued a lot about the reasons why. Some people maintained that he had wanted to marry his cousin, but her father had refused point blank because 'Assaf had had no job and could not support himself, let alone a wife and family. The story that other people told was that the girl herself had refused and had even threatened to set herself on fire if they compelled her to marry him. The reasons she gave were that he was eccentric and cruel. When her mother was questioned about it later on, she too made it clear that she had been totally opposed to the whole idea. Her daughter's shoes, to quote her own words, were worth as much as the head of that layabout who spent his entire life wandering around in the desert and in caves. She went on to say that he was crazy too. Anyone who took the trouble to investigate the matter further would have discovered other reasons as well. The entire issue kept al-Tiba occupied for a while, but it all came to a peaceful and quiet end. No one even talks about it any more. The one result of the episode was a name for 'Assaf, Abu Layla. With the passage of time any people who still express any interest in the matter have changed their attitude to a flippant sarcasm, all the more so since 'Assaf adamantly refuses to answer any questions on the subject.

This then is the way people have come to regard 'Assaf. At this juncture they would find it odd to see him presented any other way.

Hunting had been one of his main interests ever since he was a boy. Year by year as he grew older, the interest developed along with him. When he was young, the whole thing was on a simple and primitive level; he used to do exactly the same things that boys of his age will always do. However of all the boys of his age he was the one with the greatest interest in hunting. When his father died, he became totally involved in this risky pastime. The things which boys normally do no longer amused him. He would imitate the older men and go wherever they went. He was forever trying to devise new hunting techniques; as a result he acquired some habits which

made him seem somewhat eccentric. He would spend much of his time in orchards. He started smoking at a very early age. He spent long periods contemplating the realms of nature, human beings and the animals all around him. Most of the time he would avoid people. When he was in their midst, the weapon he would use against them was silence.

As he grew up, these traits grew with him. When his mother died, his temperament altered even more drastically than before. Instead of coming back into the village and behaving like everyone else, sowing, reaping and leading a sedentary life, he purchased an old kind of hunting rifle. It seemed very peculiar for a boy of just thirteen to be copying older people, spending all his time on his own outside the village and moving from one mountain or valley to another.

Beyond these details about 'Assaf's childhood, almost nothing is known about large segments of his life. If he himself had ever felt in the mood for reminiscing, he would not have been able to remember anything about more than a tiny fraction of it. Even then, the only major events would all be connected with hunting: where he had shot the wolf and how he had managed to do it; when snowfall had piled up in drifts and blocked all roads and made travel difficult; how many times he had had to sleep in caves for fear of dying of exposure. He could also remember the number of times he had refused to shoot at a female partridge because she was herding a gaggle of young ones in front of her. No one else was particularly interested in these memories and others like them. Even if he felt like telling some more stories, they would always sound weird and convoluted; he could not maintain the necessary momentum.

People like him change gradually day by day; they become even more eccentric and introspective. It was his very nature that led him to prefer staying out of other people's way. It was almost as though he lived in his own private world with its own particular problems and did not feel like sharing them with anyone else. He had a harsh and offhand way of expressing himself; if you did not understand the way he was or know how to respond, it could sometimes sound offensive.

Al-Tiba knew many different kinds of people, and so it got used to 'Assaf just as it did with everyone else. No one felt

alarmed or threatened by his scruffy clothes and taciturn demeanour, or even by the string of oaths he would unleash from time to time when someone pinned him down and started firing provocative questions at him. People initially regarded him with a leering kind of sarcasm, and that turned eventually into laughter.

'Assaf himself got used to living like this and found it very hard to change his ways. On those few occasions when he had to get some different clothes, he would behave in the most incredible fashion, doing things which no one in their right mind would even contemplate. For example, when his shoes wore out and he had to buy a new pair, he would not put them on immediately; several adjustments had to be made so as to alter them in certain respects. Where the two smallest toes were, he used to cut the leather, put the shoes in water, and then beat them hard on the ground. If anyone had the nerve to ask 'Assaf why he was doing this, he had no reply. Even he had no idea why he was doing it. If it were just shoes that were involved, there would have been no particular problem; somehow everyone would have understood. But he did something like this to all his clothing. He used to rip his trousers in several places and then sew a number of colourful patches over the holes; sometimes he even used a piece of soft leather.

This was the way he was, and no one could persuade him to do otherwise. During the major festivals he had to make the round of all the homes in al-Tiba, as people have been doing since time immemorial. But, unlike everyone else, he would do nothing to change his appearance. In fact, he would actually go to enormous lengths to wear the scruffiest clothes he could find in his tiny room. That incidentally was the only place he had left once he had sold off first the orchard and then parts of the house itself. The interior room and a small vegetable garden were all that was left.

People in al-Tiba got used to 'Assaf. With the passage of time and a growing familiarity with his ways, he no longer prompted questions or signs of disapproval. The only thing which did attract their attention (but even that did not last for long) was when he acquired a dog. When people asked him about it, he used to go on at great length about the animal's importance and

pedigree; he would grossly inflate the amount of money he had paid for it. On several occasions people claimed that 'Assaf had found the creature as a stray and that it may have wandered away from some other hunter. In any case 'Assaf had brought the dog back with him. Other people in al-Tiba went so far as to suggest that 'Assaf had actually stolen the dog. 'Assaf himself would listen to some of the things people kept saying about him, but his only response would be to give an insouciant smile and pat the dog's back affectionately.

'Just listen to those imbeciles!' he would tell the dog. 'Do you hear what they're saying?'

At that time 'Assaf spent longer than usual inside his house and then stayed in al-Tiba for two whole weeks without going out to hunt. People had explanations for this: he was scared, they claimed. Those with the theory that the dog was stolen were merely confirmed in their suspicions. If there were any other reason, they suggested, 'Assaf would not be so afraid to go out hunting and to take the dog with him. Other people were of the opinion that 'Assaf had just found the dog somewhere. They felt sure the animal would go back to its owners as soon as it managed to get out of the house and regain its freedom of movement. There would be absolutely nothing 'Assaf could do if the dog ran away and went back to its rightful owners. The truth of the matter is that 'Assaf only felt sure when he did things for himself. Now it so happened that some hunters came in to al-Tiba from far away. He took them out, expended a great deal of energy on them, showed them the right places to hunt partridge, and let them keep five birds which he had shot himself. The hunters gave him the dog as a present, but 'Assaf did not have complete confidence in the animal. He spent a great deal of time training it, and that made people in al-Tiba laugh at him. In fact at that period they were laughing at just about everything he did and especially the amount of time he spent inside the house. He used to tie a rope on the dog and then start taking it on walks around the neighbourhood. He bought the dog some 'bitter-sweet' and tried to teach it new habits. Everyone who saw him dragging the dog around on the end of a rope had a hearty laugh.

'Just look at the idiot,' they all commented with malicious

glee, 'he's keeping a hunting dog on a leash!'

'How are we supposed to tell who's doing the hunting or helping whom!'

That was not all either. Now they all joined the other people in believing that 'Assaf had stolen the dog. If that were not the case, they argued, he would not be going to all this trouble.

'Heaven help us! Perhaps they're actually siblings! After all, they do look exactly alike, don't they?'

All this belongs to the recorded history of al-Tiba, something which has almost faded from people's memories by now. Once 'Assaf and the dog became attached to one another, the image of the two of them became as one. Some spiteful characters even went so far as to suggest that there was a close resemblance between 'Assaf and the dog: they both had a large nose and big ears, and the sound of their voices was muted, rather like a gurgling noise. Needless to say, no one could say anything of the kind to 'Assaf directly or even when he was around. Even so, everyone called the dog 'Assaf too and stared at it in a particular way.

Al-Tiba is no different from any number of other towns and villages in the unkindness and sarcastic wit which its inhabitants can exhibit and in its desire to make up jokes and fabricate lies about others. People love talking about the way other people spend time away, especially if they are like 'Assaf. When someone spots him at almost the first light of dawn, a somewhat sarcastic grin will cross his face as he asks 'Assaf a series of questions about hunting, the dog, and the incredible things he sees in the desert.

Talk will continue far into the night, and there will always be lots of stories. Someone is bound to volunteer a piece of information along these lines:

'I saw 'Assaf today with the dog on his back!'

'I spotted the real 'Assaf today,' someone else will chip in, cackling with laughter as he does so. 'There he was hunting, rifle in hand. That's the real 'Assaf, not the other phoney one!'

''Assaf took a shot at a male partridge once,' a third person put in, 'but he missed and hit the dog instead. That's why it's only got one eye!'

In fact, something had happened at one point. But the

story-telling techniques in al-Tiba are different from elsewhere in the region. If every story told by someone from al-Tiba is supposed to contain a certain amount of truth, then it has to be admitted that the dog's eye was missing from the very first day it arrived in al-Tiba. That was the way 'Assaf accepted the dog; he did not ask how or when it had happened. One day he said it might have happened while hunting, but he did not go into details. People in al-Tiba took up the tale and went on to say that it had happened to 'Assaf himself and with this very same dog. If there had been an occasion when 'Assaf was forced to carry his dog, it was because the animal had been involved in a vicious fight with a wolf, one in which 'Assaf had almost been killed as well. The dog had been mangled in several places. If it had been left behind, it would certainly have died. As for the tale which some people in al-Tiba tell about seeing 'the real 'Assaf', namely the dog, carrying the rifle and hunting with it – well, there's no foundation to it whatsoever! It is simply a piece of fantasy tinged with sheer envy. The dog was so highly trained that it could help by carrying some of the game his master had taken (such as a male partridge) in its teeth.

Al-Tiba will enjoy a good joke just as much as any other village when times are good and people feel relaxed. But things soon change when times are fraught with worries. When the rain stops and drought moves in, this change is a drastic one. The village seems to have gone into mourning. At sunset it looks shrouded in darkness. A wave of mournful silence pervades the entire area. Nights seem long and quiet, broken only by the forlorn howling of hungry stray dogs and the occasional shot. At such times the air over al-Tiba becomes polluted by a heavy and alarming smell which is only recognized by people who know it well and have smelled it before. At such times many things change.

There has never been a year like this one before; that much was obvious from the very first days of winter. Normally all the villages which lie on the edge of the desert expect early rains. These rains herald a fruitful season and bring with them an

untold number of desert plants (which, some people claim, fall down from heaven along with the rain itself!). This year however there were no rains, but instead bitterly cold winds. People in al-Tiba were used to dealing with cold winters and were not unduly bothered or disturbed by the whole thing. After all, it was still the beginning of winter, and there would surely be many good long days ahead. But the older people knew better. They had experienced the caprices of nature before and knew how to distinguish harbingers of a good season from warning signs of drought. They started to get worried, a sensation which was actually more akin to sorrow. Bad times from previous years came flooding back into their minds, bringing with them memories of calamities and illnesses, followed by death. Even so they managed to suppress all such premonitions and memories and said nothing. The younger men who had had less experience of nature and its seasons looked quizzically up at the sky, wondering whether the things they knew could be of any use at all in this type of situation. Children started asking their parents if there would be mushrooms, truffles, sorrel, mallow and dozens of other types of desert plant around this year, but the men simply stared back at them in dismay. It was almost like having to answer difficult exam questions. The answers they gave their children were vague and almost provocative.

'It's only just the beginning of winter,' they said, 'and here you all are with a disease we didn't even know about when we were your age: you've all got unanswerable-questions disease!'

Needless to say, the youngsters were not satisfied with such stonewalling. They went to ask their mothers and plied them with endless questions.

'When are we going out to the desert, mother?'

'When are we going to pick mushrooms?'

'Will there be as many truffles this year as in previous years?'

Children at that particular age probably did not dare to keep nagging their fathers with questions and arguing with them, but it was much worse for their mothers. The women did their best; in their own mysterious way they used every means at their disposal to parry this line of questioning, a process which involved not a little sheer cunning. But promises had already

been made, and little minds were working at fever pitch on dozens of dreams and desires. When the mothers glanced at the men and particularly the older people, they could read in their expressions signs of hard times to come and miseries which would not be easily forgotten.

This then is the way winter began this year. One day would follow another, and yet no rain would fall. People going out to the field would feel more and more uneasy and glance mournfully at the soil. The cold had made the ground rock hard. Twittering birds arrived in large numbers and set up a non-stop barrage of sound from dawn till dusk; they would peck around, oblivious to the scarecrows which had been put up at several points in the fields. Every day would bring with it some new warning sign. People began to get even more anxious. Women in particular started to feel downhearted. When the weather turned stormy and the cold winds blew, the village would be gripped by an agonizing feeling of impending doom, just like a razor's edge.

'Will these winds bring any rain?'

'Will anything grow after all this dry weather? Even if we get a drop or two of rain now, is there any guarantee we'll get some more in March and April?'

People had other kinds of questions on their minds too. 'Once this season's over, God should send us some early spring rain. If that happens, we'll get something to eat from the desert and save ourselves the risk of exhaustion and even death. But it's already too late for that. March is almost over and gone without a single drop of rain. Who can tell how life'll turn out now that this has happened?'

But at the very end of March it did rain. It was plentiful and lasted for two whole days. For that short time people's expressions changed and so did their behaviour. Even those who had nothing in particular to do with agriculture looked happier and sometimes gave vent to their feelings in quite lighthearted ways. Many people made so bold as to suggest that this year's season, and particularly the summer part, would be the best ever. However those people who worked the land and knew nature's caprices said nothing and were not very optimistic. They were waiting for something else. No sooner

had the sun risen on the third day than they stopped any more early seasonal planting and proceeded to plough as quickly as possible. In doing so, they, like everyone else, made use of every means at their disposal to guarantee themselves a good crop!

The old people were neither convinced nor delighted by this plentiful, almost frenzied rainfall at the end of March. They were of an entirely different ilk, one fashioned perhaps by nature itself and by those long days and the apprehensions which went along with them. Or perhaps there were other yet more obscure reasons connected with the very soil itself. Each one of them realized that every passing day brought him closer and closer to the earth. As long as that was the case, each and every one of them felt impelled by a secret desire for a piece of earth which could receive his flesh and bones when he died. The very same feeling made him realize deep down inside that the aridity which was gradually infiltrating the soil and the slimy mud which the March rains had caused were both unsuitable for his eventual plans. As a result, each one of the old people was anxious not to die in a harsh year like this one. The mean tricks which nature could play made them feel desperate, anxious and even weary of the whole thing, but nevertheless each one of them wanted to die a decent and noble death, to pass away quietly and peacefully after fulfilling all the obligations of this life; and all this to be achieved without any fuss, but with all the respect due someone of his age. The very idea of dying the way young people or even animals did, suddenly and without any kind of warning, would drive them to the most profound feelings of despair.

Things turned out exactly as the old people had predicted. The abundant rains which fell at the end of March moistened the seeds deep down in the soil. They all started to grow and soon broke through the surface soil. Many seeds had been lost to the birds, and the ploughs had made deep furrows; as a result the plants sprouted at some distance from each other. Even so, they looked strong and sturdy. When the April sun bathed them in its warmth, they really came to life and grew even more. The farmers, filled with illusory optimism, kept repeating that what they really needed was a couple of rainfalls in April, one in the first half and another towards the end of the

month, and then one final one in mid-May. All this optimism was an attempt on their part to convince themselves, no one else. In any case all such hopes were to be forlorn. From the very outset this year kept providing ample warnings of drought to come. The old people kept telling themselves the same thing. 'Assaf kept saying it out loud to everyone. If anyone bothered to ask him what was making him say such things, his answer would be neither clear nor convincing. 'Just you wait!' he would remark. 'That's all I have to say. You'll see for yourselves soon enough!'

When people heard 'Assaf talking that way, they began to get nervous and short-tempered, almost to the point of picking a quarrel. But deep down inside they realized that this maniac 'Assaf was saying things quite unlike what other people were saying. There was some truth to it, a hidden truth probably connected with things about which they knew absolutely nothing.

And then, mirroring what old people had sensed and anticipated, people started mouthing cautionary phrases; the words just seemed to slip out. They were followed by expressions of genuine alarm, accompanied by crystal-clear statements, things like:

'This year will be one of the worst al-Tiba has ever lived through.'

'I can't recall we've ever had a year like this one in al-Tiba,' one of them commented after a pause for thought and some gruesome reminiscing.

And that is precisely the way things turned out, exactly as the old people and 'Assaf had told them it would!

People in al-Tiba felt an all-pervasive anxiety, and the sensation grew worse day by day. But 'Assaf did not allow himself to stay still or relax. He would arrive back in the village at sunset with dozens of birds, but never gave himself a moment's rest before starting to knock on people's doors. He would choose the houses carefully. Actually he would have given the matter a lot of thought well in advance. Even before

the shot was fired at a bird, his intention would be clear: 'You're for Umm Sabri,' 'You're for Da'ud the blind man,' 'You're for Sa'id who's no good at anything except having daughters!'

These are the kinds of things 'Assaf would say to himself while hunting. When he went round the village knocking on people's doors, he was anxious not to scare people by making them think the very worst: maybe that a friend or relative had died, or something like that. So, before the door was opened, he used to yell out: 'It's 'Assaf. I've come to spend the evening with you!' And without waiting to listen to the torrent of abuse which would descend on him, he would leave a few birds and be on his way!

He used to do this every single night. He would leave just one bird for himself; on occasion there would be none left at all. When he had finished his task, he would start preparing ammunition for the next day's hunting, working by the light of a small lantern. This was a task where neither exhaustion nor interruption could be excused or condoned. It was late in the evening by the time he had finished. After a quick bite to eat he would soon be sound asleep and snoring his head off. He used to have any number of dreams, each one filled with myriad pictures. What was al-Tiba like then and now, he would ask himself. Why does life get more difficult day by day? Images of trees and birds would waft by, followed by a non-stop flow of water and spring blanketing endless spaces with its blooms and colours. Then he would see everything in flight; the entire sky would be full of birds. Hunters would only hunt in season, and then only those birds which needed to be hunted. Then there would be images of people who had died. When rain started falling, he began to worry that the ground would get waterlogged and he would not be able to get back. He started running ... That made him start in his sleep, and he woke up, feeling scared that time might indeed have passed him by. He could feel the dusty atmosphere in the room and rubbed his eyes so that he could check on the time. He had an internal clock of his own which never went wrong. All these years, summer and winter, it had never let him down. People used to come out from the city. They would make copious preparations to go hunting with 'Assaf: they would set alarm clocks and give the strictest

instructions that they were to be woken up at the right time. They were worried that 'Assaf might leave them behind and go on his way. His pretext would always be that the sun was up and the day was being wasted; he used to tell them that they needed to be in the target area by sunrise. These people would always get the time wrong, whereas 'Assaf never did; his clock was always automatically right!

For ages and ages 'Assaf had been used to hunting on his own, taking only his dog with him. But even he found it hard to refuse to take other people with him, especially if they were guests or during years of drought. He would have much preferred to be on his own. But what was he supposed to do when the ground had completely dried up, the clouds had long since vanished, and people had nothing left to eat? Previously he had kept certain hunting grounds to himself and vowed he would never show them to anybody or even let anyone else get close to them. But now even he could not keep them a secret long. Even so, he used to issue stern warnings:

'Don't shoot at the females. They're the ones which give us all the rest!'

He was not always convinced they fully understood. 'The females,' he would add, 'I mean the female partridges, are smaller, and their colouring is more subtle.'

Even then they might still ask for more clarification and information. 'Like some human beings,' he would continue, 'the partridge cock is a coward.' He would stare at them all and laugh. 'It gets very scared. It has very bright colours, much brighter than the hen. And it will fly off before she does!'

They would all nod their heads in acknowledgement, but 'Assaf still had his doubts about these hunters. He particularly disliked the cowards and tricksters among them. But what worried him more than anything was that one day al-Tiba might find nothing to hunt at all.

'These birds belong to us,' he would say with some anxiety. 'Either for today or tomorrow. If we're careful about conserving them, they'll be here for us to hunt. But if we kill them all or hunt them too much, they'll make an end of it and look for somewhere else to live.'

He pictured a land totally devoid of partridges to hunt.

'Listen, you people,' he yelled testily. 'If these birds disappear and we get a year of drought, and if the government keeps telling us a pack of lies year after year and not building that dam, you can be sure that the people of al-Tiba are going to die, the whole lot of them. I'm convinced of that. How can any decent person kill human beings or birds just for fun?'

This kind of conversation would be heard at the start of every hunting trip. But in spite of everything, 'Assaf felt himself compelled to take a veritable caravan of hunters to the spots where partridges were to be found. Most of the time he would resort to a certain amount of cunning. He used to take them to the more out-of-the-way, risky and difficult areas, knowing full well that, when hunters feel tired or scared, they lose a lot of their more rapacious instincts and become more considerate. That, at any rate, was the way he had things planned at the start of the season. However life in al-Tiba soon became even rougher than usual; hunger began to impinge and take its toll of some people. 'Assaf paused long and hard before breaking many of the bounds which he had imposed on both himself and others. But eventually he had no choice. It used to break his heart. He unleashed a whole stream of curses and proceeded to do a whole series of stupid things.

'Look!' he used to say to justify the terrible wrong he was committing, 'if people don't eat the partridges, the jackals and wolves will get them anyway. Even if some of the damned animals managed to get away, shepherds would still come and pick up the eggs. People in al-Tiba mustn't be allowed to die!'

He had his own particular philosophy which had been formed and honed by both time and experience. Even if he had been willing to explain what was going on inside his mind, he would not have been able to do so. If he were asked why he was doing this or that, he would look baffled. 'That's what hunting is all about,' he would say. 'That's the way real hunters do things.' And that would be it!

This then was the way he would deal with the question of hunting. He followed this philosophy himself and expected everyone else to do the same. When the season for migratory birds arrived, he would feel profoundly relieved and gratified.

'All of you buckle down now!' he used to say, enunciating clearly so that everyone could hear him. 'Every hunter has to prove himself!'

His aim in making this statement was to take the minds of other hunters off partridges. Actually they were already tired of hunting the bird. Their feet had become sore from clambering up high rock cliffs and penetrating far into remote valleys. Deep down they positively welcomed his suggestion and wholeheartedly supported it.

"Assaf's the best hunter around,' they would tell themselves and others by way of justifying their actions. 'If that's what he has to say, then we should certainly believe him and go along with his suggestion.'

'Assaf was anxious that the whole thing should not be seen as a trick, pure and simple. He used to take them out to the place where migratory birds would be found and to other spots where they would fly over. He never stinted about providing them all with the information they might need to help them get a larger bag of birds. Through some obscure process of admiration they flocked round him and let him take them wherever he decided and at whatever hour of the day. That way he made sure some partridges were left alive in remote areas.

'Once they feel secure again and realize that the gunshots have stopped,' he told himself confidently, 'they'll return to their nesting-grounds and live in peace again. The eggs will hatch, and a new batch of chicks will populate the mountains and valleys again!'

Actually 'Assaf is well aware of the fact that every animal and bird can defend itself; it knows where to go when danger threatens. It is just that, as he watched novice hunters getting more and more rapacious and thoughtless, breaking every rule in the book as they did so, he used to reflect sorrowfully that in the end people would die because partridges might well disappear.

'They kept hunting gazelles until they'd killed them all off,' he added after a long silence. 'The desert's been turned into one gigantic graveyard; the only things it produces are dust and death. People in al-Tiba have got to learn to be more intelligent than other people and not just kill everything off.'

In years like this one some unknown instinct would teach

partridges how to disappear; not even 'Assaf could explain it. They could make it look as though they had become extinct for good, as though they would never reappear in the future, clucking like chickens as they meandered around the feet of the mountains to the East. When this happened, you would notice a distinct transformation in the hunters, even the most stubborn of the novices. This abrupt change would be helped along by the fact that day by day desert birds, and particularly grouse, would start moving closer to al-Tiba. These timid birds would be made more reckless by their fruitless search for seeds and water; and that made them easy targets. Even small boys in the village could take pot shots at them with whatever primitive weapons they had managed to manufacture for their own use. At certain times of day the boys could even sneak up and bag a number of birds!

However the power of life itself was stronger still. Even the grouse, which is a really stupid bird, gradually learned some tricks of its own. It may well have been both hungry and thirsty, but by now another force had taken over and was calling the shots. Reckless grouse, which at the beginning of the season could be killed in tens and hundreds and could not tell a hunter from a peasant, rapidly became more cautious. At the outset hunters would treat them with total contempt and use any number of rude expressions to describe them: how tough the flesh was; how stupid it was; how hunting it was no fun. As days went by, these people would find themselves gradually drawn into a chase for it, at which point they had to come up with some excuse for their behaviour.

'It got hit and ran away,' they would intone loudly with that arrogance which is the hallmark of all hunters when they have been fooled. 'Now it's even more cautious than other birds!'

'It's more difficult than hunting partridges,' others would add assertively.

This is the way things start to change. Al-Tiba is living through some pretty hard times these days and looking for some way to remain alive. That is why it chooses to turn a blind eye to any number of things, such as the reckless behaviour of its young people and the way they gallivant off to hunt with an abandon which is as unprecedented as it is unanticipated.

Every so often the young people organize evening gatherings, and that surprises no one. At these meetings they agree on the places where they have to go and the methods they will use to hunt a large number of birds, especially grouse and partridges. They spend a lot of time talking about the mistakes of the past which need to be avoided. 'Assaf rarely participates in these sessions. He cannot be bothered with them; after all he knows where to go and when. When the young people start questioning him about places to go and techniques to use, the replies which he gives them are both terse and dogmatic:

'This madness clogging your brains will be the death of all the game that's left.'

He pauses for a moment. 'The hard times haven't even arrived yet,' he continues in that brash and severe tone which is his hallmark. 'We should be getting ready for them!'

This suggestion is greeted with scoffs of protest and accusations of running away when things get difficult.

'If you've an ounce of self-control left,' he will respond emotionally, 'I suggest you save your bullets. The grouse will come to you; you don't have to go looking for them!'

But the youngsters will not listen. Powerful hidden forces seem to be impelling them to take revenge; they feel the need for some kind of challenge.

Al-Tiba pays the price for such urges. At the beginning of the season the birds would not be worried about their own safety and would come in close. But they soon became scared and started looking for other feeding-grounds or else changing the times of day when they would arrive and depart. In a word, the birds learned to adjust their life-style. Life became more taxing and difficult for every living creature. 'Assaf himself used to come back to the village with large numbers of birds, but even he had to face the same forces as the novice hunters. His bag started to dwindle. Hunting turned into an exhausting activity, more like an expedition.

Even so, 'Assaf is not one to take a rest!

And so began the harsh, grim days. Al-Tiba had long since

made up its mind to be located in that particular part of the world, right on the edge of the desert. The self-same process made it select hunting and a life full of courage. The village learned year by year how to endure all kinds of difficulties and calamities.

In most places droughts would lead to rifts between people; everyone would be looking for some way to guarantee a slice of bread for himself. In al-Tiba on the other hand droughts and other miseries only brought people closer together; the whole community became a single family, one body united. True enough, there was a small group of people who came from somewhere far away, chose to settle in al-Tiba, and carried on working and behaving with all the disinterest and suspicion of total strangers (in spite of everything which al-Tiba was offering them). But, if you discounted them, everyone faced the hardships with a spirit of cooperation and sharing; and that made things seem less grim and easier to cope with. This remarkable process, involving as it did a kind of tacit heroism, meant that no one was allowed to die without the utmost effort being made to help him. In most cases this was done so surreptitiously that no one even noticed. At some time of day or night households with families so large that they could not face up to the realities of life would leave their doors open. Amounts of wheat or little portions of sugar, tea and soap would be tossed inside. People who had given up everything they owned to buy seeds or other things from the city found themselves offered help which was not available to those who were more self-sufficient. The disabled and handicapped were taken care of by a number of young people who would cook their food for them; more often than not it would be a soup broth or shepherd's pie. Widowed women would get a tremendous amount of attention at such times. Al-Tiba could normally feed its children pieces of meat, but with such limited resources it could not afford to be so generous in the face of such difficult times year after year. The old people kept warning everyone not to be extravagant. They urged everyone to conserve as much as possible and to regard the times al-Tiba was living through as a period of plenty, one which would be followed by a rapidly accumulating mound of hardships. But the village

carried on as usual, basing its activities on some obscure hope; it was as though they were all waiting for something or other to happen. Needless to say, this hope never came to fruition, as many imagined it would. Instead the wait turned into one prolonged torment!

The young people from the village who were living far away in the big city did not wait for the cries for help to arrive. They rushed to offer whatever assistance they could. They sent back wheat, barley, lentils, sugar, tea and soap. They also sent messages to members of their family and friends, suggesting that they come to the city and stay with them for a while. But such proposals were entirely unacceptable to people in al-Tiba, particularly the old people. They could not conceive of the idea of going away and leaving others to die of starvation or thirst. The very idea provoked a feeling of shame which was utterly intolerable. They did not respond to the letters from the city or accept the invitations which were offered. The children who had left the village but stayed in touch knew full well that what they were suggesting was well nigh impossible and that no one would accept the invitation. As a result they went to enormous lengths to offer all the help they could. Soon afterwards they started flocking back to the village themselves. At first they came just for a visit, but the purpose would soon turn into a strong desire to participate somehow in the process of facing this bitter disaster. After all they might be able to do something or at least learn. The visits would be extended for several days and repeated at increasingly close intervals. The motivation involved was not merely sentimental attachment or even a kind of masochism. Many other things arrived along with these returnees: extra portions of wheat and barley, linen clothes, and along with all that, promises and a generous helping of sheer verbiage. It was always these promises that everyone in al-Tiba found the hardest to tolerate. This year in particular they turned into an unbearable form of torture.

'Before you know it,' the word would be, 'they'll be building the dam. Once it's finished, al-Tiba will never be hungry or thirsty again.'

That is precisely the sort of thing that influential types in the capital used to say. 'Before autumn's over,' they would go on,

'and the rainy season starts, machinery will start digging up the ground and lining the rocks up in piles. Hundreds of workmen and engineers will arrive. You'll see the whole thing with your very own eyes!'

People in al-Tiba were quite prepared to accept whatever was sent out to them and to distribute it with scrupulous fairness. They used to listen to this talk from the big city. They would hear all about the earth dam which was due to be built close to al-Tiba: it would be able to retain all the water which poured down during certain seasons and finished up in the bowels of the earth. No one could imagine how all that water could simply vanish or where it went. All that was left of these torrents were pebbles and deep trenches where large clumps of soil and vegetable-patches had been washed away. Big words and empty promises, they were the other things left behind!

In al-Tiba people listened to all this talk in a rueful silence. They could not make up their minds whether their children and the other men who locked themselves up inside big buildings were lying to them.

'We've heard this stuff so many times before,' they would tell themselves. 'Years have gone by, and nothing has changed.'

When times were good, they forgot all about the dam, the road and electricity. It would never occur to them that they might be given such modern conveniences. But when drought came, they would remember every detail: what the men who had come looked like and what it was they said. Something else jogged their memories too. Friends of their children had come to al-Tiba as visitors in previous years when the soil had been fertile and produce was good. They had gone hunting in areas around the village and had come back so overjoyed that at some points they had behaved more like children. They had seemed sincere enough. Some of these people were now important senior officials in the distant city, so much so that their names were mentioned in the same breath as those of prophets and saints. However they no longer had any memory of al-Tiba;

they had forgotten all about their friends who lived there. It was all over.

In drought seasons al-Tiba was left to lick its own wounds. But, when times were good, the village would send baskets of apricots into the city at the beginning of the season and towards the end would follow them up with grapes and dates. In between there would be yoghourt, cheese, eggs and young lamb as well. Nothing was expected from the city in return. Al-Tiba would send these things in to the city with a feeling of pleasure bordering on sheer joy. Fathers and mothers would send in baskets and bags of yoghourt on the small bus which used to leave for the city in the early morning. For them it was a solemn obligation. If they missed the departure of the employees' bus by just a minute or so, or else were unable to pick the dates at the appropriate moment, they were bitterly sorry!

So there was al-Tiba, unchanged and constant, forever loyal to everything in it and to every single person who lived there or passed by. The village managed to forge in its children an exceptional sense of loyalty, something which was unparalleled in any other villages whether close by or further away. During this cursed and dire year a large number of al-Tiba's sons came back to the village. No pleas or hints were required. As their feet touched the soil in al-Tiba and their eyes fell on the houses, they were filled with a profound sense of sorrow and chided themselves inwardly for waiting so long. The comparison between their life in the city and that of the people in al-Tiba gave them a guilty conscience. However, these initial feelings of sadness and regret soon gave way to a powerful desire to do something. Perhaps this time al-Tiba would be saved; then it might survive until the dam was built. Maybe something would happen in the big city which would make it possible for them to face the cruelties of nature without having to wait for false promises of the fickle rainfall which came year after year and then failed them for years.

As soon as people arrived from the city, they would take off their city clothes and put on the things they had worn years ago in the village. During the daytime they would pass by most of the houses in the village and enquire after the people who lived there. They would grieve for those who had died, ponder over

the whole host of suggestions which would be made to them, and make several private resolutions as to what they would do when they got back to the city. But that was not all. They distributed the things they had brought with them and started writing whole series of letters to relatives and friends in the distant city and even in the United States. At night they would spend a lot of time thinking and talking, but with every word they uttered there came a profound feeling of bitterness because they could not be sure about anything!

When needed al-Tiba could display tremendous patience and tolerance. Strangers could be forgiven just as much as its own citizens. But in drought seasons anger could be seen as well, the kind of anger which sometimes might seem like a trifling matter but which would eventually turn into an inconceivable and indeed intolerable kind of madness.

For example, a young man who was studying far away started to hold forth. 'Back there in the city,' he said, 'people don't behave the way you people do here. They convert words into power; organized, aggressive power. We've got to do the same, something really urgent, before death gobbles us all up.'

One of the older people curled his lips into a disapproving leer. 'And what do you suggest we do?' he asked, looking up at the sky and then down at the ground. 'You should realize,' he went on before the young man had the slightest chance of replying, 'no one can stand up to the government. We have to make use of our common sense and figure out what we can do.'

'When drought comes,' the young man went on nervily, 'you spend an entire year asleep. When it doesn't, you send letters and petitions. That's it! Al-Tiba will never survive that way!'

'Listen, my boy!' the young man's father retorted, 'Al-Tiba will survive. There have been many bad years like this one before. People have made it through and carried on with their lives. Al-Tiba's still here!'

'When you're living in conditions like these,' the young man said sarcastically, 'there's no real difference between living and dying! Just take a look at the soil, the trees and the livestock. Look at the expressions on people's faces. Everything dying. Another year like this one, and there'll be nothing left!'

This conversation could have gone even further. However, at this point some guests who had arrived that afternoon came into the guesthouse. With that the whole atmosphere changed.

That afternoon towards the end of summer, four guests arrived. They were brought out by some of the village children who had moved to the city and were now friends of theirs. They arrived in two cars: one a jeep and the other a small, grey Volkswagen. People from al-Tiba, those who actually live there or those who have moved on, are noted for their sensitivity and gentleness. They know how to lick their wounds in silence; it is amazing how they manage to keep their sorrow and troubles to themselves, so much so in fact that many people do not understand them and fail to grasp their real feelings. On their own they will discuss any number of problems and difficulties. But let guests arrive, and all such things are put to one side while they adopt a totally different mode of speaking. This is how the old people differ so markedly from the younger ones. The former are used to keeping their feelings to themselves and to waiting for the appropriate moment before expressing their feelings in public. The latter on the other hand seem to be afflicted by a kind of fever which makes them incapable of keeping their innermost thoughts and feelings to themselves. In seasons such as this one that is so even more than usual.

As a result some people wanted to discuss things for one last time, even though it was in front of guests. Many people in al-Tiba had waited so long for their children to come home from the city that their patience had run out. For one last time they were eager to discuss the prospects for the dam: when was it going to be built, and what were they supposed to do to get the whole thing started. But even they could not wait any longer than they had done already. For many years past they had been patient and endured their hardships in silence, but no more. From now on, they would be resorting to new methods of convincing officials back there in the city of quite how much power they actually had.

Yes indeed, the people in al-Tiba had been waiting for a long, long time. But on that particular afternoon, when they spotted