



Hafid Bouazza

De voeten van Abdullah

Abdullah's Feet

Hafid Bouazza is a self-assured writer with an exuberant style. His tendency to decorate the world with words and his refusal to do so with moderation are no mere quirks. This man has the subject, the palette and the flamboyant hand of a painter. In each of the eight stories a game is played with tradition. They are almost all set in the writer's motherland and depict the waning power of the time-honoured authorities. Gentlemen can only maintain their status with great difficulty, fathers withdraw - silently and frowning - into reading the Koran, adults commit sinful deeds among the trees and in dark corners, and women violate themselves with cucumbers and aubergines. The imams continue to utter the pious texts appropriate to their status as spiritual leaders but the children cannot help but notice that the lives they lead outside the mosque are far from pious and that when it comes to unseemly behaviour with boys, alcohol and women they are suspiciously well informed. The ranks of Dutch literature have been joined by an exotic writer who plunders the remotest corners of the dictionary. The story *Lord of the Flies* is simply overwhelming. In it an entire village suffers under the weight of mysterious bad omens - wells that talk, dark shadows, a plague of flies - and is irreversibly sucked towards a blazing fate. Ten village elders die simultaneously from disappointment when their imam, who had been brought to the village as a saviour, is taken away by the gendarmes as a prisoner. Yet the

funeral procession includes eleven biers: the left foot of the mysteriously vanished boy Abdullah lies on the last one.

This collection of stories can be seen as Bouazza's farewell to his native country and his resounding entry into the language of his new homeland. Everything in and about this book is alive with promise.

ARJAN PETERS

Hafid Bouazza was born in Oujda, Morocco, in 1970. He came to the Netherlands at a young age, studied Arabic and worked as a teacher and translator of Arabic. He made a striking entry into Dutch literature with the publication of a collection of short stories *De voeten van Abdullah* (Abdullah's Feet), and is considered one of the Netherlands' most talented young writers.

Bouazza has several qualities that distinguish him from the rest: a strong personal stroke that manifests itself in distinct but well-chosen words, a sense of irony and the grotesque, and a relativising sarcasm that keeps at least two things at a distance B the Netherlands and his land of origin.

HP DE TIJD

Florid prose, with baroque word compositions and new linguistic structures. The composition of the stories has also been well thought out.

DE GROENE AMSTERDAMMER

One of today's most interesting young writers.

NRC HANDELSBLAD

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NEWS FROM BLUEBEARD'S CASTLE

Elsbeth Etty in conversation with Hafid Bouazza

From *NRC Handelsblad*, 21-06-1996

After studying Arabic Hafid Bouazza did a variety of odd jobs and is now trying to make a living as a writer. He is a Dutch writer - and the emphasis is on Dutch: 'A French writer is someone who writes in French, a foreigner is someone who writes in a foreign language, and a Dutch writer writes in Dutch.'

The twenty-six-year-old Moroccan-born made his literary debut with *De voeten van Abdullah*, a collection of exotic short stories written in a baroque style. The setting is usually a village in Morocco. His language in particular attracted attention. The title story begins like this 'My father, having kissed his pages, shut the Koran with a good-natured clap, which made the light glister. There sits my father: on an unsteady wooden divan, in the zebra light of the barred sun over the thatch roof, a red Koran in his hands, white-turbaned, a bookish furrow on his brow, white-bearded, gaunt, scraggy, wrinkled, resurrected, alive, as if he were made of the same material as the stick lying beside him: a Pinocchio in the dusty workshop of my memory.'

Although the book was on the whole well received, Bouazza is irritated by reviewers who pin him down on his Moroccan background. 'When people say that I write Arabic-Dutch, I refer them to the *Tachtigers* [a Dutch literary movement of the 1880s]. My place is very clearly within the Dutch linguistic tradition. My kind of wordplay would be impossible in Arabic.'

Hafid came to Holland with his mother and six brothers and sisters when he was seven. His father had been working here for years. 'We arrived in Holland on 22 October 1977, on a Friday. That's why I used that date in the story *Abdullah's Feet*: that's the day when the son comes home from the Holy War.'

The family went to live in a small town in central Holland, where the Bouazzas were the only immigrant family. 'That made it easier; all the kids were Dutch, so you learnt the language very quickly. At home we always spoke Moroccan. My mother doesn't speak Dutch, she is illiterate. Like most Moroccans my parents came here with the idea they would go back as soon as possible. It was usual for Moroccan children to be sent to a technical school to learn a skill that would be of use to them back home, but my mother always encouraged us to go to the university.'

When I say that it is remarkable for an illiterate mother to stimulate her children to follow an intellectual profession, his reaction is piqued: 'Illiteracy doesn't stand in the way of common sense, surely? But it's true, my mother is a remarkable woman.'

In *Lost Son*, one of the few stories in Bouazza's book that is set in Holland, the narrator's mother is Dutch and has converted to Islam. She is so convincingly portrayed that the story seems autobiographical. 'No no,' he says, 'my mother is an Algerian with

a Moroccan passport. With that story I wanted to say something about the complex notion of identity. That mother was raised a Catholic. She converts to Islam and subsequently reproaches her son for turning away from Islam. She herself assumed a new identity, but she condemns her son for doing the same. The story is intended as criticism of people who claim exclusive rights to the truth on the grounds of their faith. I am sick and tired of the emotional waffle about identity of all those people trying desperately to show who and what they are. What is my identity? Moroccan? As a writer there is no need to worry about that, identity has nothing to do with literature. For an identity you need a community, and I do not feel part of the Moroccan community.'

He was amused by a reviewer who commented that the two stories that take place in Holland are about the clash between cultures. 'But my intention was to parody that theme. The story about Apollien, a young girl in Amsterdam, is a love story pure and simple, about two people who are completely different. The boy has expectations of the girl which come to nothing and then it goes wrong. That sort of thing happens all the time. It has nothing to do with where you come from. Love is love. Identity... pff... I really don't think it's important at all. If I did I would have stayed a Moslem.'

It is quite clear from Bouazza's stories that he has turned his back on religion. He can't stand fundamentalism. In the story entitled *Satanic Eggs* he ridicules the sexual morals preached by Islam: the sale of cucumbers and aubergines has been banned by the religious leaders because they think the female section of the population might be tempted to indulge in perverse behaviour. A young greengrocer opens a crate among his dead father's personal effects which turns out to contain gleaming cucumbers and aubergines, and he distributes them - for money - to a growing crowd of girls, mothers and grandmothers, who promptly use them in his presence. Until he is arrested and the women taken to the gallows.

Isn't he worried that he might offend Moslems with this kind of story and that he will get into trouble with the imams? 'Yes, but there's nothing I can do about that. Just as there's nothing I can do to stop every woman called Apollien from thinking: all Moroccan men see us as playboy bunnies. I heard that story about the cucumbers and aubergines from a scholar of Arabic who told me they wanted to ban the sale of those vegetables in Egypt. What fascinates me is that religious leaders can be so perverse. It would never have occurred to the women in my story to abuse vegetables in that way if the imams had not given them the idea. Islam is a very legalistic religion. There are so many rules that you can't see the wood for the trees, and that is what I make fun of. I don't see any alternative. If I hurt people's feelings, too bad. They don't have to read what I write, after all. If they find it offensive they can throw the book away. You can't expect any literary understanding from fools of that sort.'

Not only *Satanic Eggs* is about sex, just about all Bouazza's stories are about more or less forbidden sex: a master abuses his young slave, imams and paedophiles do it with little boys, little boys lust after their sisters and then help each other up to penetrate a goat or donkey. Oddly enough all the cruelty is accompanied by great tenderness.

Bouazza describes the budding sexuality of boys between the ages of eleven and thirteen in the Moroccan village where he lived until he was seven. On the face of it his stories are autobiographical (in some of them the first person narrator is called Hafid), but in reality they are a mix of memory and fantasy. 'I didn't experience those things personally. There is clearly something caricatural about them. But I have been back in Morocco a few times and then I saw how sex-obsessed kids of twelve, thirteen, are. The average Dutch seventeen-year-old in a disco is a square compared to them. They're so crass. In the beginning that put me off. But still, the steamy atmosphere in that little village appealed to me. What interests me most about sexuality is how to give it form on a literary level. Of course sex with children is abuse. I write about it tenderly so as to make clear that certain things are quite easily accepted in the world of a child, as long as adults don't start making a fuss. As long as Oprah Winfrey isn't on TV in Morocco no one will take any notice.'

Whether abuse is really so prevalent in Morocco Bouazza doesn't know, he hasn't researched the subject and anyway he doesn't care. 'It 's not that I condone it. What is important to me is to create a world in which sexuality is viewed in a different way than it is here, a world in which sex is part of everyday life, just one of those things, so to speak. I think sexuality in the Arab world is less controlled, because sex is divested of intimacy. It is seen as a biological phenomenon, as something fundamental. The Koran deals with sex in a very pragmatic way: it's part of life, but it's not necessarily connected with love. The Koran says: "Your wife is a field for you, go into your fields as you wish." A very nasty metaphor, I think.'

I ask him why he gives the impression that he is writing about his own life, if it is not true. 'Shades of traditional shame haunt me, intent on preventing me from writing an autobiographical story,' says the narrator in 'Abdullah's Feet'. He proceeds to describe his father and mother so realistically that one reviewer commented that this story was 'self-confessedly' autobiographical.

Bouazza finds this amusing. 'My father hasn't got a beard and my mother looks quite different. I wanted to write this story as a sort of confession: a Moroccan tries for the first time in his life to write something personal, and finds it extremely difficult. So the reader thinks: ah, a problem with Dad and Mum. Until suddenly two feet without a body appear on the doorstep, and everything is turned upside down. Actually, I also wanted to parody confessional literature.'

If there is a common thread linking Hafid Bouazza's stories it is the importance of memory, or rather of the workings of memory. In 'Spookstad' (Ghost Town) he describes the tragedy of an old man who has abused his slave for years and eventually falls victim to his memories. In the love story about Apollien the narrator says: 'I am a Bluebeard's castle for the daughters of my memory.'

'Our memory is the workshop of remembrance,' Bouazza claims. 'What I mean by Bluebeard's Castle for the daughters of memory is that the boy's memories are locked away in closets, like dead women. They are not living memories for him. A memory does not come alive of its own accord, you need language to make that happen.'

How much memory, for instance of Arabic, is there really in Bouazza's language, which is so full of unusual metaphors, poetic reversal, combinations, personifications and comic expressions, many of which are not to be found in any dictionary? 'When I was a child my mother made me study the Koran, so that I wouldn't forget my Arabic. I knew over thirty of the hundred and fourteen chapters off by heart. But I didn't understand a word. The narrative part of the Koran is actually quite small: stories about Abraham, Noah, Mary, Joseph and Jesus, which are also quite fragmentary because they deal mostly with the differences with the Bible and the Torah. I've read the Bible too, just out of curiosity. The Beatitudes are particularly good, very beautiful.'

The only aspect that might reveal an Arab influence, he thinks, is that he does not write analytically. 'But nor does Nabokov, and Borges isn't analytical either, the way a writer like Marcel Proust is.' His unconventional style and vocabulary can be traced to his study of literature. 'I use figures of speech which, as the Arabs say, are as old as the sea. There are people who believe you can't really say "hasty clothes", and that you ought to write something like "she dressed hurriedly". I turn adverbs into adjectives, simply to heighten the effect. Virgil did the same kind of thing. I'm a great believer in strong images. But I have noticed that some people find that kind of style irritating.'

Once in a while he slips a colloquial Arab metaphor into his stories. 'The expression "I chastised my hand" for masturbating, for instance. Some other unusual words which have struck my readers as archaic do have something to do with Arabic to the extent that, when I had to translate classic Arabic poetry as a student I ploughed through the WNT [Dutch equivalent of the O.E.D.] in search of the right words. Then my knowledge of those words came in handy because I often describe people who are very old, and they sometimes use words that aren't to be found in modern dictionaries. Sometimes I choose obsolete words simply because they sound better.'

In fact, Hafid Bouazza is far more heavily influenced by Dutch literature than by Arabic. He is especially fond of the 'abele spelen', a medieval drama in Middle Netherlandish, from which he promptly quotes at length and off by heart.

'It's a very complex work,' he says, 'It's also about the separation between sex and love. I soaked it up. In the story about Apollien the main character lives in Eglantine Street in Amsterdam. I chose that street because Lancelot waited for his lover under an eglantine bush. In the Middle Ages the eglantine was the symbol of sensual love. Initially I wanted to include many more allusions to Lancelot, but I decided against it in the end.'

There is little point in asking Bouazza how he relates to Dutch literature: the lecture he has just given ran from the Middle Ages through the nineteenth century to the writers and poets of today, and that says enough. He knows a lot more about Dutch literature than the average Dutch author or intellectual, and he is passionate about the subject. 'Intuitively I have always known that I had to write in Dutch, that is the language closest to me. It's my step-mother-tongue. Funnily enough I have come to love Geerten Gossaert most of all. At one point I was writing just like him.'

It is clear that his future stories will not necessarily have a Moroccan or other Arab setting. That's why, Bouazza explains, he made the village in which most of the stories take place burn to the ground. 'That village will never return in my next books. I have written about Morocco because in some crazy way I thought I knew the Arab world better, even though I grew up in Holland and have lived here for twenty years. Now I realize that I wrote about that world precisely because I don't know it so well. That enabled me to use prototypes and stock characters like the lecherous imam, the pious father, the crafty paedophile, the desired sister. I was able to play around with those stock characters. If I write about Holland, about Amsterdam, I have to be much more subtle.'

Translation by Ina Rilke

Extract from Hafid Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah*

‘Abdullah’s Feet’

Amsterdam: Arena, 1996

Translated from the Dutch by Ina Rilke

My father, having kissed his pages, shut the Koran with a good-natured clap, which flurried the light.

There sits my father: on a shaky wooden divan, in the zebra light of the barred sun over the thatch roof, a red Koran in his hands, white-turbaned, a bookish frown on his forehead, white-bearded, scrawny, shrunken, wrinkled, alive, as if he were made of the same material as the stick lying at his side: a Pinocchio in the dusty workshop of my memory. My father signals the end of his reading with a pious sigh. Shades of traditional shame haunt me, intent on preventing me from writing an autobiographical story.

On Friday 22 October 1977 my father shut the Koran with a sigh, but his lips kept up their mumbled rumination and in the dark chasm dividing me from the landscape of my past I still hear the murmur of his verbal ingestion: outlines of words, a slurping of hot-baked divinity, the flash of a gold tooth. Then a few stones roll down into the depths, interrupting my Arcadia.

My father shut the Koran in the light of that Friday sun. It was time to get ready for prayer. A female hullabaloo reached him from the kitchen. With a groan of geriatric inertia he asked himself what could be the matter. It was clear that someone - a woman, his wife: my mother - was weeping and wailing.

‘Fatima!’ he called out to my mother - his wife. ‘Fatima! Wife of misfortune, come here! What is going on?’

A Fatima - not my mother but my eldest sister - came running. We had all learned to obey his wishes without delay. Hesitation was fatal. Fatima’s eyes were swollen from crying, but he did not notice, because he was not in the habit of looking into the eyes of his daughters once they had reached a certain age.

‘What is it, baba?’ Fatima asked.

‘What’s all that shrieking about?’ My father, Sheik Abdulllah, jerked his chin towards the kitchen.

‘It is mother,’ replied Fatima. ‘She dreamed of Abdulllah last night.’

Abdulllah was my eldest brother and Father had forbidden us to speak of him since the time that he (Abdulllah, my eldest brother) had joined the army to fight a Holy War. He had appeared in my mother’s dreams quite often in recent weeks, but she had obeyed my father’s commandment and said nothing. Now her vow of silence had apparently succumbed to the persistence of her dreams.

‘Bring your mother here,’ he said. He was clearly annoyed by the reference to Abdulllah.

Fatima, my eldest sister, went away and Fatima, my mother, came into the room.

‘What is it, baba?’ she asked.

It is not merely for the sake of literary convention that I would like to describe my mother at this point, but also to satisfy my own curiosity and no doubt that of my readers too. But remembrance is biased, my own memory prudish, my rearview mirror clouded. Nowadays I remember my mother primarily in terms of clothing and aroma and reproach. The latter two are so tightly bound up with my heart as to preclude public exposure - the first can do no harm.

Here stands Fatima, my mother, face to face with me and the reader. In spite of the cascade of clothing her figure is clearly defined. The splayed pleats intimate a comforting plumpness. To be honest, not an exceptional woman: stout, shaped by the anthropometric constraints of Arab maternity. The wealth of bosom and loins suggests a diva: the voluminous buttocks hark back - rather literally - to black Africa. These distinctive charms are traditionally loved by Arabs: ostrich-down cushions for the spasmodic euphoria of manly release (forgive me, Father).

My mother had dreamed that she lost a bloody molar, and that was the cause of her hand-on-hand slapping lamentation: she was convinced that her son, my brother, Abdulllah, had been killed in battle. Her body was still heaving with self-lacerating grief as she said this, but my father growled to show his disapproval of such womanly superstition.

And growl is the correct word. My father was never well spoken: in fact I sometimes wonder if he could be said to have spoken at all. He growled, he muttered - his chief occupation, really - he grunted and availed himself of other like sounds. Sometimes, I think,

his mouth did not actually move at all, as if the sounds came out of his nostrils and sometimes even out of his ears. His vocal cords didn't get much exercise, and so it's strange to think of his constant throat-clearings and expectorations of greenish phlegm. His ever-furrowed brow (not high, for he lowered) wore a severe frown, which seemed to barricade his unknown thoughts. But perhaps his features were nothing but the lineaments of a safe-deposit box in which oral piety stored the documents necessary for admission to Paradise. In any case: he is a gratifying character.

And in any case my mother was to desist from her wailing and to disbelieve the stuff of dreams. She helped him to his feet and into his slippers. He would go to the mosque and pray for Abdullah. He would wash now and she could go back to the kitchen.

Reassured, my mother withdrew to the kitchen, that dark corner where I spent so much of my childhood. Now I'm back there again, running around in the steamy smell of cooking and fresh bread and groping my sister Fatima when she bends over. And that is how I remember my sisters and mother: mostly in the curves of a stooping body. I see my sisters and mother blurring together, bending, bending, bending over to wash my morning face, to take the bread out of the clay oven, to retrieve a bangle from the suds, to help a fainted sister upright, to... whatever.

Eventually I was chased out of the kitchen with a smack on the back of my head, my hand still hot with carnal discovery, and made for the latrine before it could be occupied by my father. A father in the privy before Friday prayer is the scourge of a child's bladder. But in the rush and excitement I forgot to shut the door of my private donor-bank behind me and not long after, just as a world of vertical smiles (my bending sisters) was about to be flushed away in a vertiginous daze, I was sent packing by a blow to my twitching buttocks from my swearing father's stick. He called me a dog and a devil and a son of sin and then shook his head almost sadly. His revulsion was aroused not so much by my seedless spillage as by the fact that I was still using my right hand instead of my left, in spite of all his warnings. As usual with experiences in childhood, the implications of his advice were lost on me then; now I am much more capable of understanding the merits of ambidexterity in the wonderland of single-handed relief.

Still shaking his head my father Sheik Abdullah locked himself into the small privy, where he squatted for a cross piss and sforzando stool. Then he enjoyed the arpeggios of water during a paperless, left-handed, ballock-bouncing ablution. And after a thorough cleansing, Father, divinely purified and dripping pizzicato, left the privy.

Fatima and Fatima helped Sheik Abdullah into his cleanest djellaba and sprinkled him with the same perfume (imported from Saudi Arabia) that the Prophet himself is supposed to have used. When he was ready, immaculately white and prophetically scented and leaning on his stick, my mother and sister kissed his hand. Without saying goodbye he walked towards the front door in a dream of (thanks to the thatch roof) chiaroscuro. Goats chewed and chickens clucked around the door. He threaded his way among the bleating goats - the chickens scattered like kitchen maids in old farces - and stepped outside. Friday greeted him festively with garlands of light and the belligerent cries of children playing marbles, whom I had joined, my buttocks still smarting. We were so engrossed in our game (which would soon lapse into a fight) that we did not notice Father and did not stop playing to greet him respectfully, as was the custom. Even the female onlookers, my little sisters, were so absorbed in the static, hollow-backed stance of non-participation that they did not see Father.

In those days we children were not yet taken to the mosque. My father was of the opinion that a child in a mosque was not a foetus of lifelong piety, but a flatulent monstrosity. So my relationship with mosques did not develop until later, and not in the country of my birth. I do not know the dizzying profusion of architectural Islam; I know only improvised places of worship with a Jerusalem of musk, incense and socks.

On his way to the mosque my father Abdullah came across his son-in-law Abdullah - my brother-in-law - husband of my newly wed and pregnant sister Fatima. Abdullah kissed his father-in-law's hand - the same hand my father then raised to his mouth by way of reciprocated greeting. During his wife's pregnancy (a time during which the man is not permitted to know his wife) my brother-in-law Abdullah had become a passionate follower of the Maliki school, which offers a welcome alternative for the needs of men in times of frontal abstinence. I seem to remember my brother-in-law having muttered, after an amorous manoeuvre with his pregnant wife in their room in our house, which I ear-witnessed: 'May God give our good mullahs' - solace in times of hardship - 'a thousand blessings.'

My father and he made their way mosque-wards in silence. Both shared the deepseated, pristine alleviation that succeeds visceral turbulence. And it is this very tingling sensation which results from internal and external expurgation, this bulwark of hygienic immunity, which is, I believe, the essence of Islam. The soul dwells in the intestines. This has left me with a sexual obsession for women performing certain sanitary acts.

To make up for my defeat at the marble game and the ensuing fistfight, I shut myself away again and castigated my painful hand. The universe shook and buckled on quaking knees, exploded - and balance was restored. Gravity dragged at my calves like a beggar clawing the hem of a passerby. Semi-satisfied I went back to the kitchen, where my mother would have other causes for delight.

The muezzin's nasal countertenor, blaring through megaphones, called the Moslems to prayer. The mosque had opened its mouth wide to devour a great stream of patient believers: the hubbub inside, which I can hear at this moment, must be the machinery of its digestive tract.

I lose sight of my father and brother-in-law in the melee: the multitude clots and melts and I can only just catch something of the preparations inside the mosque - angels shedding their wings, the splash of water - before the crowd is engulfed in the cool gloom and the eye of memory closes contentedly.

Meanwhile my mother would have other causes for delight.

I was back in the kitchen, empty and listless. With my hands in my trouser pockets I idled back and forth between the kitchen and the well outside, I heard my obscene words reverberating in the pit, falling falling falling into the depths like Joseph: I tried to catch a fly in my hands, I watched the course of a beetle that seemed to have lost its bearings, held my foot over that same beetle and crushed it slowly and accurately, watched my sister and mother busying themselves about the kitchen. My sister tried to chase me away again, but I dodged her with a bored shrug.

Now and then my mother, without interrupting her work, would burst out crying, thinking of her son Abdullah, and my sister would console her. Then she calmed down. She paid no attention to me, although she was always telling me not to linger too long in the kitchen, among the women, or I would never sprout a beard when I was big. And normally she would have forced me to take a siesta. Even my snot-smearred sleeves and fly-ridden face failed to draw her attention that afternoon.

Suddenly there was a knock on the door. My sister went to open it, as my mother did not have my father's permission to answer an anonymous knock. A moment later we heard my sister fall to the ground with a harrowing scream. My mother wiped her hands on her apron and rushed to the door, followed by my curiosity.

‘Mother! Mother!’ The cries issued from an emotional, empty doorway.

Mother looked left and right, but there was no one to be seen. The empty street (where have my brothers and sisters got to?) looked back at us inscrutably.

‘Mother! Mother! It’s me!’ the emptiness cried out.

Mother thought it wise to gather up my sister’s body lying at her feet, so as get a better view.

Then she saw.

‘Mother! Mother! It’s me, Abdullah, your son! Your son has come home!’

On the ground, in the doorway, stood Abdullah: two feet, cleanly amputated above the ankles and crowned by what looked a bit like slices of salami. The ankles were dusty and the toenails black from a long march. The imprint of sandals, no doubt worn out on the way and discarded, was visible. The veins were swollen. Unmistakable: it was my brother Abdullah.

Mother did not faint. Mother was, is, a sturdy woman. At this advanced stage of my life I can still hear how, at the outset of that same life, Mother burst out in bloodcurdling ululation. The entire street, if not the entire village - in any case my whole room right now - began - begins - to shake.

Amid cries of ‘My son! My son!’ my mother embraced Abdullah’s feet and pressed them to her ample bosom. Her cheeks were wet with tears.

‘My son! My son! My son has returned!’ A crowd of neighbourhood women and children gathered inquisitively around Mother’s transports of delight. Abdullah’s feet were carried aloft like a trophy, and the exuberance of the still swelling throng bordered on hysteria.

Like a Bride’s Train we Children trailed after the Multitude of Women following my Mother upholding Abdullah to the mosque: I know of no better way to express the intoxicating glory of that moment than the Teutonic use of capital letters. Abdullah’s return, or rather the return of what was left of him, represented more than a personal victory, it also meant the triumph of the Holy War, which is why our instinct directed us to the mosque.

The procession crossed the whole village before arriving at the mosque at last. Prayer had not started yet, the imam was still delivering his sermon which, reasonably enough, dealt for the most part with the Holy War and the swelling ranks of the martyrs in Paradise. A look of surprise flitted across the imam’s face - surprise at the black beast made up of bareheaded women that was lurching into the mosque - then he frowned, opened his mouth in outrage, but when my father Abdullah set eyes on my brother Abdullah held high in my mother’s hands he

praised God in an astonishingly loud voice, the Imam's features cleared up and he rapped his long stick sharply on the minbar to silence the congregation.

'Let us,' he spoke in a broken voice, 'pray to God and thank him for this blessed day. And,' he added, 'let the women cover their heads at once.'

I never saw my parents in a better mood than in the days that followed.

Our small house, which always seemed to founder under my father's heavy frown, heaved a sigh of relief as his forehead beamed. He spent the whole day sitting on his wooden divan with Abdullah's feet beside him, and together they read aloud from the Koran. Now and then we would hear snatches of his stories about the bloody and triumphant course of the Holy War and how the Enemy was defeated. ('Praise be to God,' muttered my father, 'Praise be to God.') From time to time they would receive visitors, among whom the imam was a most welcome guest. In the kitchen my mother worked harder than ever before. We children were kept well away from Abdullah; we had to eat in the kitchen, as the living room was reserved for my father and Abdullah. They were served the best food on the best china (the china service, my mother's pride, which she always kept especially for visitors); she had regard for Abdullah's feet alone. We were not so much neglected as left entirely to our own devices. I had free play with my vulnerable and budding sisters: my mother had no ear for their dutiful protestations anyway. The toilet was where I locked myself up with the not entirely unwilling girls. We whiled away the boredom of siesta around the well.

But jealousy struck eventually and one day Abdullah's feet were suddenly gone.

My mother's hysteria was indescribable. Abdullah was nowhere to be found. We children stood around her, guiltily silent, while she castigated herself.

My father had different ways of expressing his grief. In his holy book he found recognizable projections of fatherly grief in other, far holier fathers. Now he is back on his wooden divan, reclining on his side; he has grown older in a few pages, he seems close to death, buried in a light that seems so much more sombre, and moves his lips as he reads the chapter on Joseph in the Koran.