

The Gist Of It: Short Stories By Rasha Abbas

Reader's report by Alice Guthrie

An important figure in the exciting new wave of Syrian literature pouring out since 2011, Abbas had already earned critical acclaim in Syria and Lebanon for her first short story collection, *Adam Hates the Television*, winning the Damascus Capital of Culture award in 2008. Since 2011, however, her work has leapt into a new level of raging creative intensity and precision, and in 2014, whilst completing her second collection, she has been awarded the very prestigious Jean Jacques Rousseau Fellowship in Stuttgart. Currently resident in Beirut, her new work is attracting the attention of quality Lebanese literary publishers. Her flash fiction howl 'A Plate of Salmon is not Completely Cleansed of Blood' (that I have also translated) is featured in the groundbreaking new interdisciplinary anthology *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline* (London: Saqi Telegram, 2014), and Abbas is also one of the translators working from English to Arabic on the parallel edition of that volume (Beirut: Saqi, 2014). 'Falling Down Politely', one of the two stories from her new collection which form the sample translation accompanying this report, will be published as part of my selection of contemporary Syrian work for Words Without Borders in autumn 2014.

Eclectic, intense, often psychedelic, many of her stories are dreamscapes which creep up on the reader with sudden plunges into haunting hyper-realism, operating within a punk aesthetic. In 'Falling Down Politely', we enter the inner world of a teenage girl not only navigating the choppy waters of social media and globalised mass culture like all teens must, but also engaging with much darker and more challenging aspects of current Syrian reality – a severed head, sounds of torture drifting over from the police station down the road, real or imagined bugging devices surrounding her – which eventually propels her into a desperate final act. In 'The Gist of It' a woman struggles to find and free her brother from a distressingly real and common scene of an increasingly crowded arbitrary detention centre, as the rest of the reality around her slips and drifts into stranger and more dissonant spirals of dreamy chaos.

This collection is relevant to all of PEN's aims: it will contribute to the 'common currency' of literature between nations despite the difficulties associated with writing and publishing Syrian literature at present, keeping UK and US readers in touch with Syrian voices other than those mediated by the news media at a time when we urgently need this contact; it is 'untouched by national or political passion' in that it deals indirectly with the current Syrian crisis without representing any specific political faction or point of view, offering instead a human perspective from the ground level – and dealing with many universal themes not associated with the crisis; it works to 'dispel race class and national hatreds' and 'champions the idea of one humanity living in peace in one world' by zooming in on the reality and humanity of Syrian lives rather than taking any sectarian or party-political stance; perhaps more significantly than any of the above, the publishing of this work and its translation into English enshrines the values of point 4 of the PEN Charter, given the intense suppression of freedom of expression in Syria during the whole of this writer's lifetime not just the current era. All of her topics and her treatment of them represent an act of rebellion against the despotic regime and its agents and the wider culture of censorship in the Arab world.

Many of Abbas's stories are short: we estimate that the 23 stories listed here would translate as approximately 55,000 words in English. In order not to fall short of 50,000 words for the collection, we propose to add the four best stories from her first collection with those from

the new collection to reach this figure (see synopses below). In addition, Abbas is a prolific and fast writer who has an extensive list of new story outlines to work on during her dedicated writing time in Stuttgart this autumn, which could well be added to the proposed English edition of her work. For the purposes of this report, however, she has chosen to only count completed and published or commissioned stories.

Synopses of the 23 stories forming the proposed English collection

Due to the number of stories covered here, the synopses are only snapshots rather than full maps of every aspect of the stories in question, which we hope will add up to give a reasonably clear sense of the nature of the material as a whole.

Death of a Grandfather

A young woman living in exile with her son finds out that her father is dying of brain cancer and longs to go to him on his deathbed. But, wanted in Syria for revolutionary activism, she is unable to cross the border and is overcome with guilt at her absence in his final hours.

Manifesto of Hatred

A woman wakes up to find herself blindfolded and tied to a chair, being addressed by a voice over a microphone accusing her of killing her child. She has no memory of this, but the accusations start to trigger other flashbacks from her seemingly ideal former life: scenes of her husband, and of a little daughter attending ballet classes. Seeming at first to be the defendant in a criminal trial, the woman turns out in fact to be an inmate of a mental health facility who has become the subject of a psychology class: the specific neurosis that is being studied, and that she displays, centres around protecting her daughter from any emotional and sexual thoughts that could disturb her ballet performance.

The Story of the Well

Three children sneak out of their parents' houses in the middle of the night to visit an old well, which – according to village legend – once had all sorts of magical powers. Although no longer said to be as potent as it once was, even to this day it is supposedly an oracle that will answer any question whispered into it. But when the kids arrive at the well with their questions they find a homeless man who has set up a camp by the well, and whose attempts to join in with their games fill them with terror.

In Masr Prison

A young boy is sent to prison, where he finds a barman and a baker. These two men have become convinced, during their time in prison, that they are caught up in a new version of the Bible story of Joseph, the butler and the baker unfolding around them. With this in mind, they have long been anticipating the arrival of a handsome young boy who will explain their dreams for them, as Joseph did, and tell them which of them will be released and which one executed. But in the event they are told by prison guards that the boy himself is to be executed. Desperate to make the story go as it should according to the Bible, the men manage to get the barman released, and help the boy escape – but for this to happen, the baker sacrifices his life.

The Blue Hat

A ten-minute dialogue between someone having a bad trip on salvia and the dealer who convinced him to try it. The dealer insists that the effects will have worn off in ten minutes; the tripper threatens to get the dealer put in jail after he comes down. Then things shift for the tripper, and he decides to give it ten minutes – if what the dealer says is true, he'll become a permanent regular client.

Instructions for Writing a Humorous Story

A penniless author is told he will be paid a good fee if he writes a funny story every week for a newspaper. Here we follow his desperate and miserable attempts to produce a story amusing enough to keep the job.

Immaculate Obliteration

A girl discovers she is pregnant by someone she barely knows. Half of the story takes place in her family's house, which is full of her mother's guests getting drunk and listening to piano playing while she tries to flush the pregnancy test down the toilet. The other half consists of flashbacks to events such as meeting the man, discovering the pregnancy, and having a scan at a clinic. The pregnancy test blocks the toilet and the toilet overflows, flooding the house.

Annoying intimacy

A little young boy spends a nightmarish few days with his father's elderly aunt, while his parents are in another city. Disturbing scenes include her favourite reality television show – a kind of violent 'Big Brother' featuring live rape, which she relishes while slurping ice-cream.

Travel guide: the timeless city

A city with no time is being promoted as the ultimate utopia for all those twenty-first century humans who have a terrible relationship with time. It looks like any other small city, but in cheap hotels and dark backstreets those who are ordinarily most affected by time are finding some peace. An old actress who has lost her fame is here, hanging out with young people, sniffing glue, no longer scared of time. A girl working as a hotel receptionist no longer asks herself when she'll get married or have a long relationship with anyone, just flirts with the guests. Business people usually chained to a list of appointments are relaxing here, not worried about their waiting clients and bosses. Anyone spending time here is outside of the exhausting time calculations racing on elsewhere in the world. There is one problem for those moving around the timeless city: resisting time means dealing with a very heavy magnetic pressure in the air, at its most intense on a particular rooftop terrace. One of the doors from this terrace leads back to the day before yesterday. It's not a popular door, nobody bothers to use it to go back in time and avoid mistakes or rewrite history – it's just thought of as leading to headaches. As the story ends, the narrator steps through the door and feels a huge magnetic pressure on his chest as he struggles to open his eyes onto the red sunset of the day before yesterday.

The Living Bracelet

A young tattooist drops acid in a house with people he met at a party a few hours earlier. Once they come up on it a girl who is upset by a fight with her boyfriend slits her wrist. As the tattooist attempts to stem the bleeding he hears the music of the blood flowing in his head and sees the wound as a living bracelet. He thinks he has discovered the way to make the most vibrant tattoo ever: inkless, and vital. This idea seduces all the other people in the house and the gathering turns into a frenzied group scarification session.

Backstroke with a Shilka missile

In Damascus a woman feels depressed after a visit to the optician where she has been forced to face just how bad her sight has become. She had been trying to ignore it, until she found herself taking wrong busses and being confused by people she didn't recognise greeting her in the street. Carrying her new glasses, she walks between the buildings of the city listening to the sounds of war: policemen making sinister jokes with a little child, asking him about his favorite football team and threatening him with a gun; the sounds of shelling; speeches of Hafez al-Assad or Hassan Nasrallah playing as mobile phone ringtones. She walks on, heading for a small lake outside the city, where she can swim for the last time before having to put on the glasses. The farm is in an area where

there are ongoing clashes, and she knows there is a serious risk of a Shilka anti-aircraft shell hitting the lake, but she doesn't care. In the blazing heat and with her weak eyesight all she can think of is floating on the cool water of the lake.

The Dead Ones

In weather so hot that people are on the verge of full-scale hallucination, a paralysed female narrator lies on the bed and watches her partner's struggle to cross the room and reach her, beset on all sides by mirages.

Who will play Saladin?

This story is based on actual events in Syria after Hafiz al-Assad's death. As it is told in media circles, Maher al-Assad called in the main television dramatists for a meeting and showed them his father Hafiz's office, where there was a big statue of Saladin. Apparently he just said 'Papa used to love Saladin...' and they took the hint, and the following year TV audiences were surprised to find two parallel serialised dramatisations of Saladin running in the same season.

Here we see inside a big movie production company, where an argument rages over who would be the best actor to play Saladin in a movie they are under presidential orders to make as a national duty. As we slip away from realism, a woman is cast as Saladin, and filming commences, provoking all manner of extreme and polarised reactions from the producer and the rest of the film crew – for some this is seen as having important mystical significance, for others as absolute heresy. When the set burns down the story shifts into a version of – and commentary on – the European witch holocaust, when several million women (and men) were burnt at the stake.

Filthy beauty

In the first few months of the revolution rebels called on civilians to break their ID cards to show their objection to the regime. Anyone who snapped their ID card by mistake was therefore terrified of detention by the security forces. In this story a woman traveling in a shared taxi finds herself having to flirt with a soldier in order to charm him into letting her and her fellow passengers through the checkpoint despite her broken ID card. Her strategy is successful, in the end, but its impact on her communication with her husband when she reaches home is very negative – both in terms of how she feels about sexual intimacy with him and in terms of his perception that in order to have been let through by the soldier she must have done more than just flirted with him.

Stone cold

An encounter between a homeless man and a passerby unravels into stark revelation of their respective needs and expectations of each other – and of life – and culminates in police intervention exacerbating all of their respective challenges.

Three deaths of George

St George, in some Islamic mythologies, is synonymous with al-Khidr, the Eastern 'Green Man'. This story centres around a tomb shrine to him which is popularly believed to grant wishes, and one refugee's frantic attempts to be reunited with her husband after they are separated when fleeing attacks on their village. Finding herself safely over the border, she asks a little girl to go and whisper her prayer for her husband's safe passage to the shrine – but al-Khidr seems to have a problem with keeping track of whose wish is whose. Like St George, the village is tortured to death in three stages: stabbing, being crushed, and being set on fire – and the couple are never reunited.

I don't remember killing Bobby Kennedy

A man at the very end of his life, having been robbed of all his memories by Alzheimers, is supported by his wife who effectively functions as his memory – reminding him about his major life events and explaining who his nearest and dearest are over and over again. Gradually we realise

that we are witnessing the intimate world of the Palestinian Sirhan Sirhan who was accused of killing Bobby Kennedy and still insists, to this day, that he doesn't remember anything about it.

The Circus Comes to Town

All the parents and children in the town are anticipating a wonderful show and plenty of family-friendly fun. But behind the make-up and costumes lurk a twisted crew of sinister characters, intertwined in a story that moves between onstage and backstage action. In one of the weird climaxes of this piece, a magician obsessed with his assistant kills her onstage as part of his act.

A disciplined army is a strong army

The strong military aspect to the Syrian school paradigm is notorious, and hated. Prior to 2003, when there were limited reforms of military education law, all students wore military uniform and there was constant drilling of a memorised text called 'A disciplined army is a strong army' in military classes. Girls were forbidden to wear tight clothes, use hair dye, or have long nails. This story is an excerpt from the diary of a high school girl who is trying to find a way to escape from school to go on her first ever date, arranged by throwing a piece of paper with a time and location at the boy in question – her neighbour. Her efforts to adapt her military uniform into an attractive outfit, and her escape plan, are convoluted and require their own version of military precision.

Three defeats of half heroes (from Adam Hates the Television)

Three stories of defeat, each one showing someone surrendering to their weakness with great shame or misery. First up is legendary ancient Arab poet 'Amr ibn Kulthūm (one of the writers of the mu'allaqat) who was known for his dignity, and for killing a king that insulted his mother. Here we meet him as a weak and flawed human, scared of the king and scared of letting his mother down, who eventually provokes everyone's disappointment and his own annihilation. Second is a college student from a conservative religious background who is losing hope of ever finding love because of her disfigured face. When she tries to get near to any of her male colleagues they deliberately do something to offend her pious sensibilities so as to drive her away. In the end she comes into college without her hijab, shocking everyone and feeling utterly defeated and degraded. Third is a fifty-year-old woman who urgently needs to support her family by working, now that her husband is in prison. After one of her relatives finds her a job in a new local TV station, she gets fired for being too slow. When her relative speaks to the director of the station on her behalf, they agree to have her back on a freelance basis. She is desperate to prove she is young and fast enough for the job she so badly needs, and adopts a ridiculously youthful look – extreme make-up, very bright coloured clothing, and trainers – and earns utter contempt and derision from her colleagues in the process.

Before our parents came (from Adam Hates the Television)

A woman visits her newly married friend, who used to be an active member of a small communist political party. The friend is living in harsh financial conditions, after marrying for love rather than according to her parents' choice of a suitable man. Her parents refused to support her union with her older and penniless husband, and cut her off. The apparent romance of this situation in the narrator's eyes dissolves when she meets the man and he turns out to be a cruel and dominating character. As the two friends prepare a meal of the cheapest vegetables in the market (aubergines and potatoes) the guest reflects on the misery of her own relationship and its contrasts and parallels with the scene she witnesses her friend in.

Dog for a barking sky (from Adam Hates the Television)

A TV reporter leaves her home very early in the morning and sets out on a long drive to another city with the camera crew, who she hates. Miserable, stuck in a van for four hours, she contemplates the ugly break-up she's going through and her confusing ongoing affair with an older married theatre director who she will meet in secret at the location she is being sent to cover.

Adam hates the television (from Adam Hates the Television)

A man and woman meet in a bar. She is an aspiring TV host, and as such he assumes she is very shallow and irrelevant to his troubled inner process. As they interact and their night unfolds, however, the balance of wisdom and influence shifts unexpectedly between them.