

Excerpt from CLAMOR OF THE LAKE by Mohamed El-Bisatie

Gomaa's wife used to go to the shore on the days of the gale. In early youth she had found a silver bracelet among the debris spewed up by the sea. She wore it on her wrist and never took it off, and though more than twenty years had passed since that day, she would still go out to the shore, never missing a gale. Her small house near the lake was stacked with fantastic objects picked from the shore: shells, hollow and flat; hard, colorful stones; bottles of different shapes and hues; empty cans; spoons; plates; knives; broken bits of chairs; deflated dinghies.

She would leave her house in the midst of the gale, slipping out unnoticed, into the gloom of the somber dawn, with an empty sack slung over her shoulders. When the catch was abundant the sack was quickly filled. Paddling home, she towed the sack in the water. Her husband, sensing her return, would be standing on the threshold, wrapped in an old quilt. He would take hold of one end of the sack. Preceding him into the courtyard, she would stand by the fire, wringing her wet gallabiya while he emptied the sack. Then she would return to the shore. But when the gale was niggardly, she could remain on the shore until midday and return with a sack only a quarter full.

Women neighbors saw her days after the gale wearing new things. Once she wore leather slippers adorned with roses. Although the leather was cracked and the petals were broken, the slippers looked dazzling on her feet, which she had rubbed with a pumice stone. Another time, they who had never seen anything but black veils saw her in a soft, colorful, transparent one. They touched it in amazement, with its delicate colorful prints—red, yellow, green. True, they spotted its frayed edges and the tiny holes mended with thread similar to the thread they used. But all these defects became invisible once it was on her head and began to wave in the light breeze above her hair, which she had washed, parted in the middle, and braided for the occasion. She smiled at their glances and pulled the veil, holding it with her lips. And on her chest they saw beads of all shapes and colors, and also hairpins the like of which they had never seen, sometimes in the shape of a leaf, or a boat and a fish.

One day she went out to the town market with her husband. She wore a yellow knee-length silk dress with brown diagonal stripes and a zipper in the back. She also wore black boots. Her husband, riding the donkey, was in front of her. The women accompanied her for a little while. Her bare knees were dark and her calves had green bulging veins. They told her that the boots looked like a soldier's, but she paid no attention.

They said they were far too big, but she had inserted some stuffing in the toes, and so it did not bother her.

They said that the dress was frayed around the zipper and torn under the arms, that her stitches were obvious for all eyes to see. She quickened her step and caught up with her husband.

She took them to her house one day when Gomaa was in town. They had shown admiration for a green and yellow woolen waistcoat that she wore over her gallabiya. It was too tight for her, but it was lovely. On the right side of the chest it had a tiny pocket with a bead. The women gathered in the room and she pushed the door shut.

A small window close to the ceiling gave off a little light. They saw an old sheet draped over one part of the wall, apparently covering hanging objects, their prominence

visible from underneath. They lifted the corner of the sheet to take a look but she pushed them away, saying that these were Gomaa's things that he did not like anyone to see. They moved toward a heap of things piled in a corner of the room, rummaging through the empty bottles and the shells. One of the women picked a red shoe with a high heel. She was examining it when Gomaa's wife took it and tossed it on the pile, saying, "There's only one . . . until I find its twin."

Gazing at them and laughing, she hitched up the gallabiya to her waist. They saw her panties, as small as the palm of a hand, barely covering anything at all. They squealed in wonder. The panties were soft to the touch and had a bright print. Pulled taut above her thighs, they made her curves look beautiful. They had strings forming two bows at the sides. She said that as soon as she pulls the strings, the panties fall of their own accord, then she pulled the string on either side and they saw the panties loosen in front and in the back. She said she had found two pairs in the last gale. Then she spun around and let down the gallabiya. Leading the way to the door, she said that not once did she pass beside Gomaa without his stripping her, and then she laughed.

They saw Gomaa, too, come out in new things after the gale. Once he wore shoes, and because he had never before worn shoes he walked sluggishly, lifting his feet more than necessary. Another time he wore brown sunglasses, and went on about the scorching sun that harms one's eyesight. In his hand was a rosary, the roundness of its beads and their color unlike any they had seen, and a small penknife sheathed in ivory that he would open to scrape a reed stalk or a stick. One day he went out with his sleeves rolled up, with a watch on his wrist that was full of water that shook under the glass—but then that would only take a few days to evaporate. And they saw plates made of a metal that does not rust. There was also a small rocking chair fit for a boy, which Gomaa's wife placed on the threshold of the house, saying it was for decoration, and a year later they saw the small table beside it.

They also saw a lantern with a slightly rusty net of thin wire encircling its round glass. Gomaa's wife hung it on a nail above the entrance to the house. Gomaa took it along whenever he went out at night to buy tobacco or stay up in the café. It had a knob on the side to turn down its flame. He would sit relaxed, the lantern by his feet, all eyes on him. Gusts of wind blew and the flame did not flicker. Gomaa spoke of the dark night, of the ditches and the animal dung and human feces that fill the alleyways. You smell them but can't make out where they are in the dark. You sense them when your foot sinks into them and they stick to it and move with it, and the moon doesn't help, because the moon doesn't come out when you need it, and it doesn't come out in lands that have incurred God's wrath.