



www.andotherstories.org

Ascension to Death by Mamdouh Azzam is one of the novels featured in the autumn 2013 Arabic reading group run by And Other Stories.

Ascension to Death

Mamdouh Azzam

Translated from the Arabic by Max Weiss

Will I leave nothing behind on earth
when I pass on?
Flowers at least?
Anthems at least?
What will my heart do?
Or did I come to this earth for nothing!
-Aztec sung poetry

Play on! My dreams of youth may now be gone. Still time drags along...
-Abu al-A`la al-Ma`arri

In the morning, she began to cough up blood. For the first time in a month, ever since they brought her to this room and bolted the door, she felt her joints softening, her body, dry and light, started to sag, no longer able to hold up her weak and wearied head.

She wasn't hungry either, this too for the first time, finding that the scraps left behind in the dish in front of her gave off the nauseating, putrid stench of uncooked food. It was the smell of her own blood.

She couldn't see a thing. The room was cramped and dark. The only light was that which trickled through cracks in the wooden windowsill.

In the beginning, when she was so overwhelmed with nausea that she fell over, sweat caking her clothes with the musty stench of pus, she thought she might have simply taken too long to eat her dinner and that the food had gone bad (she couldn't see the food, and so taste became her only way to figure out what it was). She believed that darkness was all there had ever been, only recently forgetting that two weeks earlier she had been able to see just fine, once her eyes had adjusted to the gloom. But her vision had grown weaker over the past week, and she could no longer make out anything more than a thin film, as if her eyes were coated in mist. She started hallucinating; it was like a dream: a rising column of haggard birds, black and white roses entwined, radiance, curling smoke.

This all materialized right there in front of her, against a background of regularly-repeating stone mosaic tiles of different sizes - they would shimmer occasionally, whenever the faint oscillating rays of light that seeped through the cracks shone upon them, but at other times they looked like unblemished indigo cement.

The room they had shut her in was the only storehouse in the entire village. It was a well known fact that her grandfather had built it when he first arrived from Anatolia, fleeing the Ottoman army. He constructed the building with a small window that could easily be concealed by piling up trash and dung outside. The door wasn't easy to detect either, an opening just three-quarters of a meter wide, in a neglected corner on the ground floor. For a reason no one could remember, they called the storehouse "The Horse Shack."

The old women monitoring her captivity dumped all the dung and garbage outside by the window. They swept the place thoroughly, fertilized the soil and planted mint, watering it every day. They didn't want her to die too quickly, though, so one of the old women jimmied open a crack in the windowsill with a knife she had brought without letting her two spinster sisters know, and spent the rest of the day convinced she had done a good deed.

The old ladies were strangely transformed by Salma's arrival, as if they had been resurrected from the deathly swamps where they had been buried, brought out of their endless spinsterhood, and rejuvenated by a cascade of extraordinary changes. Life pulsed through them; like lionesses, they came back into the world. They scrubbed away the stinking filth of dung, picking through each other's hair in search of ticks, and then put on their finest clothes, which had long been stored away. They had dug a basin in the ground near the storehouse window, and stopping at it became part of their sacred ritual of going out.

The window faced west, out onto the sheep's pen that had been constructed on a high rocky outcropping that towered over the desolate valley. From outside it looked like

a palace, standing tall with its thick walls. This was why Salma had never tried, not even once, to climb up to the window and shout for help. Once she heard the bleating of the sheep and the lowing of the huge Damascus cows, she was sure that nobody would hear her cries. She knew exactly where she was. During the first few days she tried for the upper opening, climbing the wall several times and pounding on the thick blackened wood with her fist.

The old ladies must have heard something, and their middle brother, who was there at the time, winked at them. They knew what they had to do. They had seen their mother do it many times before while their father was hiding out, when they heard the boom of Ottoman artillery or, much later, the bang of French rifles.

They filled two canvas sacks with wheat and stacked them in front of the opening, covering them with cloth made out of goat's hair.

After doing this they realized they wouldn't be able to hear any cries for help, so whenever they were home alone they would press their ears against the wall, and something like the beat of a distant heart would come to them, as if from deep inside the earth, sending the strangest kind of ecstasy through their shriveled bodies.

Eventually, when they could no longer make out the buried palpitations, they stopped listening. Sorrow began to eat away at them, bit by bit; their lives descended into the depths of lethal boredom, only ever disrupted by the preparation of Salma's daily meal and then lowering it down to her. It was as if the rhythm of those cries for help rising out of the storehouse below them had gotten mixed up in their ears with the echoes of their own beating hearts. Meanwhile, Salma's will faltered. On the first day of her third week there, she tried to climb the stones in order to reach the window, but she

failed. She never tried again after that, even though she wanted to. Suddenly she had trouble breathing; it felt like she was suffocating, so she clambered up the tile on the window side and sucked down some air through the crack and the narrow slits. The mint refreshed her a bit but she couldn't keep herself up there; her hand slipped, she lost her grip and fell to the ground.

Ever since then a perpetual grogginess tugged at her. She wasn't sleeping; she started suffering fits of agitation that made her hallucinate: a gelatinous dreamland, starry visions, a clutch of birds uproarious in song, fish swimming through a deluge of ivory-colored water.

All that remained was her memory. In every moment the pathways of her memory were resplendent, scorching, nothing could stop her from recalling happier days. She laid down on her back in the fields of memory for long stretches at a time, floating over the luminous expanses of her bygone happiness, plummeting into the carefree space of idle hours, unaffected by the passage of time. She would only move to adjust her body that had been battered by the dilapidated cotton mattress.

As the days dragged on, she began to eat her meals much more slowly. In general, they consisted of just a piece of flatbread, a few olives or a hunk of cheese. Her aunts would toss the food at her, wrapped in cloth. She didn't know it was a piece of her own clothing. They had shredded two of her dresses, and then used the scraps to tie together her deadly daily meal, throwing it her way just before midnight if none of them felt like seeing her face, for fear that they might be ambushed by compassion. Even so, they couldn't help but mutter an expression of sympathy and mercy whenever it was their turn to chuck the food at her. She could hear them letting out a sigh, sincere and grievous, but

it never went beyond that, and they certainly never considered saving her from the clutches of imminent death. On the contrary, they became experts in making her lethal daily meal, concocting something new each and every time.

It added vitality to their work, helped them through their pointless days, injected meaning into their empty lives. Once Salma quit her pounding, the rhythm of life that had suddenly awakened in them ceased, and cooking took up all their time.

Once in a while they might add a spoonful of sugar to the bread, include a smelly piece of Turkish delight or half a cracker, some *mujaddara* or a tomato. Whenever Umm Mut`ib brought them a slab of molasses and some sesame halva, they didn't say a word; knowing full well that she had brought it for Salma, they ate it all before setting off to cook a meal for themselves with the cheer of explorers. In the evening they threw Salma enough deadly halva to bring down a cow. They considered the situation an important topic for discussion, debate and disagreement. In the end, though they would always give in to any new suggestion in silent and reasoned agreement, even as they realized the significance of their own suggestions. The fact that they were merely prolonging her life wasn't lost on them. But they were all thinking the exact same thing: If Salma died, what would they have left but that empty rotting hollow in the fog of life?

Salma's last night had been very long because she hadn't been able to get to sleep. The idea of death was lodged in her mind, cloaked in diaphanous garb. In the evening she came down with a slight fever, and she awoke after sleeping the whole day through, exhausted, unable to get up, worn out by feelings of despair and misery. The sudden fever terrified her. Trembling and afraid, she sat straight up in bed, watching her twenty years as they leaked out of her drop by drop. Abd al-Karim came to mind, and she tried to

spark her memory with the longing of desire. She saw him at first as a spectral apparition in the opaque darkness, an infinitesimal shadow, elongated, floating like a fish, deep in discussion with a giant mass of other featureless forms.

This vision of him kickstarted her memory. Just then, searing images from the past came flooding back, revealing everything to her: the months of passionate love, travels together adorned with the silver lining of happiness, ships of wonder, days, hours, minutes spent together, Abd al-Karim's face, his words. For hours she imagined him standing right there in front of her, talking to her as he stroked his stubbly chin, hunched over like a letter of the alphabet. This time he looked radiant, about to burst with a mysterious secret, bathed in a kind of joy she only rarely saw in him. She called out to him. He didn't reply. She called out to him at the top of her lungs, imagining he should be able to hear her even if he had been crouching behind a curtain, but he didn't respond. What she didn't realize was that her voice hadn't even come out of her throat at all. She had lost the power of speech. Even so she found it strange that her voice wouldn't travel very far at night. She was astonished by this failure, broken, gazing at her beautiful apparition in the translucent light as it dissolved into dawn.

Her vision evaporated amid the cacophony of overlapping morning sounds: the bleating of sheep, the lowing of cattle, the shepherd shouting in the courtyard, the coughing of early risers, the crowing of the rooster. She couldn't understand what she was hearing and seeing. Then she started to get cold, suddenly stricken with nausea, as her veins bled, her rational mind subsided and scattered into the stony air of the sealed room. Meanwhile her body fell apart, even as it imagined itself to be on the brink of deliverance.

In the morning, she began to swim through the haze of a deep and foggy slumber, bathed in tranquility. She coughed lightly and began to spit up green blood, which quickly turned red. In that moment she saw everything around her transparent and clearly visible: she felt as if she were being lifted on a stretcher made of air, until she believed her very existence, the room and the silent darkness, the soft light coming in through the crack in the window, were nothing but tricks of the mind that had never existed at all.

Now her death was at hand!

Like a madman, stricken with panic and convulsions, trapped in a fevered frenzy, Abd al-Karim spent days searching for her, inquiring all throughout the village, asking about her, asking about her, over and over. He bared his soul to everyone, evincing sadness that was mixed with a strange kind of yearning yet camouflaged in a flammable glow. He didn't catch hold of anything but dejection, cold leads and disappointment.

His questions ceased to have any meaning. Everyone confronted him with stern glares. Basic recognition of the fact that Salma had ever existed in the village seemed beyond them.

Even his own mother, who knew the whole story from Umm Mut`ib, more or less, wouldn't tell him anything. Much later, after he had left the village and travelled to Brazil, she would say, "We aren't in the same league as the al-Zeeb family!"

She was worried that he might get attacked by some loudmouth, or by Salma's entire family, so she kept silent despite the fact that she had to harbor a bitterness like the coppery taste of blood, weeping whenever she saw him come home exhausted late at night, crumpled from the burning in his heart. She cried so hard she gave herself chronic migraines, so she started wrapping her head in a black mourning band, cinched so tightly around her skull that it nearly cracked. Meanwhile, he scraped along in his search, indefatigable, perpetually fixated on his unchanging questions: "Have you seen her?" "Do you know anything?" "Where have they taken her?" In all the time he spent on his arduous journey, he never talked about anything else. He would grab anyone he happened to pass by, forcefully squeeze them by the arms and demand, "Have you seen her?"

Once he asked all the guests at a wedding party, his lips turning blue as he pronounced the same old words with calculated precision. His half-lidded eyes were vacant, devoid of any light, and he was crushed when they responded to him with disdain.

Fate didn't offer him a helping hand, seeming to conspire against him instead. One night his father unexpectedly came down with a strange illness, collapsing without warning, and he remained bed-ridden, to convalesce in steely silence. They moved him to the hospital. When the doctor said there was nothing wrong with him, bewilderment and astonishment reigned over the house, affecting everyone.

Whenever he looked in on him, his father wouldn't turn his piercing, fiery eyes away; wide open, unblinking, expressing a frightened inquisitiveness Abd al-Karim had never seen in him before. Only his mother knew the reason for the panic in his eyes: he was terrified by the painful certainty that the al-Zeeb family was not going to let Abd al-Karim live. Their assault astounded him, and their brutality struck fear into his enfeebled heart. The fright beaming from his eyes didn't subside until his wife whispered the news of her death in his ear. From that point on, his dread dissipated, and he experienced a blissful period of tranquility, although the sickness persisted. The fact that his silence and his inability to speak dragged on like that scared Abd al-Karim, interlacing with his crushed spirit like muddy pleats of calcified sorrow. In that sense he was incapable of doing anything. Every moment of Salma's vanishing only worsened his sorrow, his fear of what the al-Zeeb's might do to his family, his concern for what little money he had to offer his family in order to keep the wolf of poverty at bay, and the disrespect shown by other people - there was nothing left for him to do but fade away. He became a transparent spirit, condensing into a cloud. His brother Salman told him he was going to

fall apart if he kept this up. Many people in the village said the same thing behind his back, because his constant movement from place to place, his wandering around in circles, and the tenacity with which he asked those oddly invasive questions about Salma made him look like a cloud, or like particles set to split apart at any moment. Every day his composure became more and more susceptible to collapse, but he didn't break down. Everybody knew that the one person who prevented his downfall was his mother. Suddenly it dawned on her that her son had come back to her as a child.

His childhood had always enchanted his mother, and in spite of the fact that she had given birth to three other boys and two girls, her heart was utterly and inexplicably inclined towards him. She never dared lay a hand on him. "I just can't," she would say, even as she chased after one of his brothers with a stick, or threw whatever was in her hand at the rest of them when she got upset. She had always attacked the other children, even at the start: barking orders at them while she sat down to milk the cow from behind in the evening—looking like a proud and solemn wax figure, unmoving against a background of unceasing chaos—or while reclining underneath the giant eucalyptus tree that had been planted more than forty years before, as she hummed and bossed people around somehow in the same breath.

Some people thought this bitter old woman would never experience love again. They couldn't believe their eyes when she broke out of her gloomy mood in order to follow Abd al-Karim around. Her eyes pooled with warmth like the sea, blurred by the flicker of a troubled heart, even as her face turned the color of soot, as if discovering him for the first time. The love that suddenly gushed across her face drove her wild, becoming a high curling wave.

Although she was prepared to carry on like that as long as necessary, it didn't last long. All of a sudden, Abd al-Karim calmed down, went limp and still. He didn't leave the house the next morning. Salma was truly dead to him. The al-Zeeb family hid the news of her death from him, and nobody told him what had happened. They buried her that night. One of her paternal uncles and three other men brought her down to the poppy field on the back of a donkey. They didn't bother holding a funeral for her, they just wrapped her in a simple shroud and took her out on the valley road.

Abd al-Karim's mother found out that afternoon. She had never cared for the girl, who she believed had made many mistakes. She would never be able to forgive a married woman for leaving her husband in order to live with another man, even if that man happened to be Abd al-Karim. At first, she felt like a heavy weight had been lifted from her shoulders, let out a sigh of relief and didn't hide her shiver of joy. But years later, when she learned how the al-Zeeb family had actually treated their daughter, even as she burned with longing for Abd al-Karim, who would never return, she cried her eyes out. They had cut her hair, dressed her in her only gown and then poisoned her, at which point Salma's life slipped away. She was gone for ten hours before anyone noticed.

Late in the morning after her death, once she was ready to walk behind Abd al-Karim, his mother went into his room to find out what was taking him so long to get up. She found him laid out like a corpse under a blanket of decaying sorrow, longing for the departed. She quickly praised God and His omnipotence, and then plunged into prolonged weeping.

In Abd al-Karim's eyes, everything had happened as if blurred by a distant fog, as though he were seeing things from behind a veil: concealed, languid, gelatinous, supple.

But that all ceased the night before Salma passed away, when the mare whinnied three long times to the north of the village. He had been sitting with Umm Samer on the small bench in front of her house as she gazed at him with a strange sadness that made him shudder. As his stomach convulsed, she grumbled, "That poor girl!" She beat her chest until she let out a cry of anguish, and then whispered, "Go on and cry already. Cry!"

He didn't understand a single word she said. Standing up, all he wanted to do was get away from her. She squeezed his hand and said, "Come back! Get inside!" He followed her inside without deciding exactly what he was going to do. But she knew what she wanted. Throwing her powerful arms around his neck and pulling him in towards her, she curled up underneath him and started to kiss his neck, his face and his lips. She undid the buttons concealing her voluptuous chest and placed her breast in his mouth even as she continued to kiss him. Suddenly, she shoved him away and ran over to lock the door before wheeling back around to undress right away.

As he left, the mare was still whinnying. It was only when someone fired three rounds in her direction that she finally quieted down. A sharp silence spread over the place. Everything around him was illuminated, emerging from behind the translucent veil, out of the distant fog and the rancorous atmosphere.

What had driven that whore to treat him like a young schoolboy who still hadn't learned to walk? And what was it about the flabby softness that made her body seem so powerful? That poor woman! Why was she in mourning? And for which dearly departed was her lament?

And with that he saw things as they really were.

He was shocked by the sight of the wintry village under the gauzy cover of darkness: bare, silent and conical trees; the bray and the clip-clop of a donkey carrying water from the well; an extraordinary mass of shimmering smoke rising from the fireplaces and cascading over the horizon in the pale soft glow; men huddled together in the doorways, resisting the end of their night. With the smell of the whore still clogging his nostrils, he felt short of breath, and from deep down inside there arose a ringing in his ears, wrapped in feelings of filth, despair and hopelessness, like somebody suddenly coming to after a deep slumber.

On the way back he ran into his brother Salman, who grabbed him by the hand and said, "Come with me!" His brother seemed to know that something had happened. On their way, they saw three women coming from Parliament Road, who stared inexplicably at the two of them. Salman furiously asked, "Don't you get it? They've humiliated us!" For the first time in a month, Abd al-Karim replied, "And how far would you need to get away before you felt safe?!" His brother regarded him for a moment in disbelief.

"Bathe me!" he ordered his mother, once he was back at home. Then he whispered to himself, "That filthy woman has made me unclean." But his mother didn't seem to hear him, as she hurried to get some kindling in order to light the stove on the other side of the flimsy wall. She was crying, and repeating over and over, "Oh, my son! My boy!" She was filled with joy, as the fields of happiness deep down inside her turned green and verdant.

When he went to bed, she soaked him with a wave from her sacred world: verses from the *Kitab al-Hikma*, the flood of her religious devotion, rose water, sheets fit for a

wedding night. Then she kneeled down beside his bed, watching his slow and regular breathing. Suddenly she believed she was witnessing his death. In the morning, after she woke him, he told her about the dream he had in which he saw Salma's death: She was on a jagged platform amidst ledges swept clean by a wintry gale, as yellowish flocks of vultures circled overhead, dragging her towards a precipitous and plummeting abyss.

At this point his mother started exalting God: "Praise be to you, my Lord! Praise be to you, my God!"