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*The Shell* by Mustafa Khalifa is one of the novels featured in the autumn 2013 Arabic reading group run by And Other Stories.

### **The Shell**

**Mustafa Khalifa**

**Translated by Elisabeth Jaquette**

I wrote most of this diary in the desert prison. But the word ‘wrote’ in the previous sentence isn’t quite accurate. There are no pens, nor paper to write on in the desert prison. This colossal structure - made up of courtyard zero, and seven more courtyards, and thirty seven dormitories, and new, unnumbered dormitories, and cells in the fifth courtyard, and still more rooms - held more than ten thousand prisoners between its walls at one point. It contained the highest percentage of university graduates in the country, and though some prisoners spent more than twenty years there, they never saw a paper or pen.

Mental writing is a technique developed by the Islamists. *One of them would memorize more than ten thousand names, names of prisoners that had entered the desert prison, names of their families, the cities and villages they came from, dates they were arrested, their sentences, their fates.....*

When I decided to keep this diary, I attempted to train my mind. I transformed it into a cassette tape, on which I recorded everything I saw, and some of what I heard. Now, I am playing back *some* of what that tape contains.

Am I the same person I was thirteen years ago? Yes. And no. A small yes, a large no.

Yes – because I have opened up these diaries, and this time I am *truly* writing them down – some of them.

And no – because I cannot write and say everything. That would require an act of revelation; and revelation requires certain terms: objectivity, and the other side.

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**April 24th**

Hands bound behind the back with iron manacles. Prisoners chained ankle to ankle with iron shackles. It’s hard to walk. We stumble: hallways, steps. They record our names on lists.

The man with the glasses leaves us standing there for a few minutes, and walks off carrying the lists. He comes back. He's got to be someone important. *Why not explain the situation to him?* He gets closer to me, I blurt out:

"Excuse me, sir -"

"Eat shit."

A resounding slap.

Thousands of shimmering stars burst forth in front of my eyes, daybreak like springtime. I stagger back. I shut up.

They drag us out of the building, I see four pickup trucks with metal cages. The prisoners call them 'meat trucks.' Maybe they got their name because they look like the trucks that take sheep from the slaughterhouse to the butcher. Or maybe because the prisoners are lined up inside the way carcasses are stacked in the real meat cars.

A metal ladder with three rungs. It's hard to climb up. Our legs are chained, and we can't use our hands. They make us sit on the truck bed, they fill up the truck, they shut the door with its heavy lock. Two security guards sit outside, in front of the door. We wait. We wait. Then the trucks all set off together.

As we get outside the city, the trucks speed up and we are leaving darkness behind us. Little by little the first silver threads of dawn appear.

*Is this a journey from darkness into light? I hope so.*

"How long until we get there?" I hear someone ask.

"About four or five hours, God willing."

"I can't stand it that long, brother. They woke me up and took me straight outside. Now I really need to go - what should I do? My bladder's going to explode."

"If you can't wait, I can undo your zipper, and you can go here in the car."

"What - here? In front of everyone?"

"Why not? Thank God, at least there aren't any women here." He turned to everyone else, and raised his voice. "Hey - listen up!"

All eyes were upon him. He explained it to them. Some of them muttered to themselves, others were silent. No one objected, so he turned his back to the poor man, and with his hands bound behind him, he fumbled around for the man's zipper and unzipped his pants, pulled it out for him, and stepped back.

"Go on! Get on with it, brother!"

This process had repeated itself four times by the time we reached the desert prison. Five other men vomited over the pool of urine. *It was all the same color.*

The man next to me, whose legs were shackled to mine, must have had an intestinal infection. Like a nightshirt, the smells of his stomach draped themselves over me.

At eight in the morning, we arrived in front of the prison. *I kept looking at my watch on the way. More than one person told me I was better off hiding it; but where? I left it on my wrist.*

Dozens of military police in front of the prison. The door was small. A stone plaque above it caught my eye, words engraved in black: "In retribution, there is life for you, O men of understanding."

The security guards opened the doors of the truck for us, and these men, who had treated us with such cruelty, led us down from the trucks gently, with a tenderness touched by compassion. "May God free you," one said. Some of them whispered softly to each other. None of them looked at the military police, who had formed a semi-circle around us. I noticed they all stood the same way, more or less: legs slightly apart, chest puffed out, left arm akimbo. In their right hands, they each carried a heavy stick, or an

electric cable made of braided wire, or something black and rubber that looked like a belt. *I later learned these were fan belts, taken from tank engines.* They looked down at us and at the security guards with superiority, disdainful of the guards and with hidden menace for us. Watching the way they moved, it was clear they were growing impatient with how long it was taking for the security guards to surrender us. They shifted their weight from one foot to the other. Their right hands twitched irritably, the implements they carried quivered. Their uniforms were immaculate, and they were clearly high-ranking – one of the men was a warrant officer first class. He was the one signing off on the lists handing us over.

*I read somewhere that when the men of a certain African tribe met white Europeans for the first time, they looked at each other in surprise and asked: “Why has this man peeled the skin off his face?”*

The military police, these men I saw in front of me, were no different. What power had flayed the skin from these faces? How had it been stripped off? Why? Where? I did not know. I just knew that these faces did not look like the faces of the rest of humanity, of our families, our friends. There was something not quite human about their features. I could not quite put my finger on it - but it was certainly there.

“Well done,” said the military police officer to the man with the glasses. “Now get moving. Your work’s done here.”

They had undone our shackles. The prisoners instinctively stuck together. The security guards left.

The circle began to tighten! Complete silence!

“Come on, move! Line them up two by two! Get them inside!”

They brought us through that small door, the words *‘In retribution, there is life for you, O men of understanding’* carved above us. Into the courtyard, two by two, in a long line. Trees and wildflowers were growing in the center of the courtyard and along its edges, and the yard was entirely surrounded by rooms looking into it. The line stopped in front of another warrant officer. He sat behind another table, with another list of names. More than a hundred military police encircled us, waiting. None of the prisoners would look directly at them. Our heads hung low, our shoulders sagged. A stance of submission, of groveling, of humiliation. How had every prisoner agreed to this state, as if he had been trained for it? I did not know. Like each one of us was trying to hide inside himself.

The nape of my neck itched, and so naturally, I reached back and scratched it without thinking.

“Look, everyone!” A voice bellowed. “Look at this filthy mutt! The dog’s scratching its neck!”

“Would you look at that - he’s scratching his neck!”

Hands dragged me out of the line. They tossed me back and forth, slapping and punching. Propelled by a punch, stopped by a slap, my neck and face burning. I wished I could cry. The officer asked me to write down my name - I was the only one left now. They recorded my name, and I became an official inmate in the prison.

They led us onward. A small iron door between two rooms, smaller than the first door. *The further we go, the smaller the doors get?* They thrust us through another door into a large courtyard: the first courtyard, a courtyard paved with asphalt. All the roads and courtyards were paved with rough asphalt. It was surrounded by one-story buildings, marked with ascending numbers: Dormitory #3, Dormitory #4... Dormitory #7.

*The doors grow smaller, yet in this courtyard hell has opened its widest gates, and we are its fuel.*

With silent precision they stop us next to each other. They separate us all two or three meters apart.

“Take off your clothes, all of you. Now! Put them to your right. Strip down to your underwear!”

After everyone had undressed and was standing there, waiting, I noticed I was the only one wearing a cross. I felt like a stranger among them.

The officer's voice started off calm, but it slowly grew sharper and stronger, and the louder his voice got, the more nervous the police's movements became, and the more the prisoners' hearts filled with panic and fear. They did not look up from the ground. They cowered lower.

Two policemen carrying whips approached me. "Take off your underwear! Do two safety moves!"

I pull my underwear down to my knees and look at them, not understanding.

"Two safety moves, now!"

"Sir, what you want me to do? What are safety moves?"

"Squat and stand up twice, you idiot!"

*Safety moves are performed to determine whether a prisoner has hidden something forbidden in his rectum.*

One of the police looked at the other, smiling. "Hah - look how small it is."

I looked down, between my legs. Sure, it was really small - even *it* was afraid, so terrified it was hiding. Me, I couldn't hide.

Behind me, a large dormitory. 'Dormitory #5-7' was written on its door, and next to it an open sewage drainpipe let out onto the ground. The water flowing out of it was dirty and black.

The inspection was over. They were skillful, precise, searching all through our clothes; all our money and papers, anything metal, our belts and shoelaces - it was all confiscated. *I was barefoot.* But despite how careful their search was, my watch slipped by unnoticed. I didn't mean to hide it - just no one had noticed it. When the officer shouted "Get moving you filth - everyone carry their clothes," I put them over my left wrist, quickly took off the watch, and tucked it into the inner pocket of my jacket. Finally, victory.

### **The *Baladiyat***

The word has a special meaning to the prisoners here. The *baladiyat* are soldiers-prisoners, inmates themselves: deserters, rapists, thieves, drug addicts, and murderers. These convicted soldiers, the dregs of the army, they all serve their sentences in military prisons like this one, tasked with cleaning, distributing food, and work like that. That's where the name *baladiyat* comes from. But the *baladiyat* in this prison have another mission.

They rounded us up at one end of the courtyard, piled us on top of each other with our clothes in our hands. The officer was shouting louder. The *baladiyat* were standing on the other side of the courtyard. Lots of them. Some carried a heavy stick, with the ends of a single thick rope tied to each end and hanging down in the middle. The *falaqa* stick. The foot-whipping stick.

"Which one of you is an officer?" The warrant officer shouted, his voice charged. "Officers, get over here!"

Two of the prisoners step up, one of them middle-aged, the other a young man.

"What's your rank?"

"Brigadier general."

"Brigadier general?!"

"Yes."

"And you, what's your rank?"

"First lieutenant."

"Hmm." He turned to the prisoners again. "Whoever's a doctor, an engineer, or a lawyer, get out!" More than ten people stepped forward.

"Stand here!" He turned to the rest of us. "Anyone with a university degree, get out of the line!"

More than thirty people stepped out, me among them.

The officer walked behind us. He stopped next to the drainpipe.

“Bring me the brigadier general!”

More than ten policemen descended upon the brigadier general, and in a moment he was in front of the officer.

“How are you doing, sir brigadier general?”

“God help me. I’m fine.”

“What’s that, sir? Aren’t you thirsty?”

“No, thank you.”

“But we need to offer you something to drink! We’re Arabs, and Arabs are famous for their generosity. You’re our guest here, after all. And it’s your duty to drink with us!”

Both of them fell silent at his mockery. A shiver ran through the officer, and he shrieked: “See that drainpipe? Lie down next to it and drink until you’re full! Do it, you son of a bitch!”

“No. I won’t drink.”

It was like the officer had been given a jolt of electricity. “What... what? What! You’re not drinking?”

He turned to the military police, shock still drawn on his face.

“Make him drink! Make him drink your way! You bastards - move so I can see!”

The brigadier general was naked but for his underwear and barefoot, and in an instant his body was stained with red and blue lines. A dozen policemen swooped down on him, beating him; heavy sticks, braided cables, tank fan belts. They came at him from all sides, but the brigadier general fought back from the first blow, striking the policemen in front of him, pummeling others with his fists. He was punching, slapping, trying to grab onto one of them, but they struck him hard, hard on his hands that reached out, grasping at them. They beat him more fiercely. Threads of blood trickled down from different parts of his body. His underwear ripped, the elastic broke. Completely naked, the brigadier general sacrificed himself. His buttocks were whiter than the rest of his body. The streams of blood showed up more clearly over them. His testicles swung with every blow, every movement. Soon, his hands fell at his sides, and they too began to swing back and forth. I heard a voice whisper behind me, “They shattered his hands. The brigadier, men, he’s too much, he’s crazy!”

I didn’t turn around. I was transfixed by what was happening in front of me. With every punch, the police tried to throw him to the ground. The brigadier general resisted, slipping between their hands, aided by the blood that had made his body slick. They struck him harder, but every time they succeeded in making him double over a little, he recoiled and slipped through their punches. With every movement they hit him more fiercely.

I saw the thick bludgeon rise above the brigadier general’s head, and like lightning I saw it descend. I heard the sound as it crashed onto his skull. A sound like no other. Even the military police stopped hitting him for a moment. Paralyzed, listening to it echo for seconds afterward. The man with the bludgeon took two steps back, and stared blankly. The brigadier general made a quarter turn, as if he wanted to see who had hit him. He took a single step, but when he started to lift his other leg, he collapsed, crumpled on the rough asphalt.

The silence was a glossy white page, stretching across the first courtyard. The officer’s voice ripped through it.

“Go on! What are you, donkeys? Drag him over there and make him drink!”

The police began dragging the brigadier general. One of them turned back to the officer.

“Sir, this one’s unconscious. How’s he going to drink?”

“Put his head in the sewer, he’ll wake up... and then he’ll drink.”

They put the brigadier general’s head in the sewage. But he didn’t wake up.

“Sir - I think he’s dead.”

“God rest his soul. Drag him to the middle of the courtyard and leave him there!”

They dragged him on his back by his hands, his head swinging. Blood mixed with bits of white and black matter stuck to his face. A path of dark red lines stretched across the rough asphalt, from the drainpipe to the middle of the courtyard, where they left his body.

“Bring me...” the officer shouted, the tendons of his neck taut and bulging. “That piece of filth ... bring the first lieutenant over here.”

“What do you think, you little shit?” he bellowed as soon as the man was in front of him. “Do you want to drink or not?”

“Yes, sir. Yes, I’ll drink.”

The lieutenant lay down on the asphalt next to the pipe, and thrust his mouth into the sewer water. The officer placed his boot on the lieutenant’s head and pressed down.

“That’s not good enough! You need to drink it - swallow it!” He turned to the military police. “Now, show this dog how we treat our guests around here. I want to make sure it all goes down.”

The lieutenant had drunk the dirty water, that brine of spit and mucus and urine and other kinds of filth. He was flipped on his back in an instant. Two of the *baladiyat* put his feet into the rope of the *falaqa* stick, wrapped it around his ankles, and hoisted his legs up.

His feet hung in the air, exposed. In a studied manner, three policemen distributed themselves around him, and their whips descended on his soles with a strange harmony, no whip falling in the way of another. The lieutenant screamed and writhed on the ground, trying to free himself. It was no use.

He screamed and cried for help. The officer walked up to him quickly, and like a football player rushing for a goal, he lined the tip of his boot up to the lieutenant’s head, and kicked the ball. The lieutenant let out a bestial howl. This encouraged the officer, and he crushed the lieutenant’s mouth under the bottom of his boot. The police kept up their work on his feet, and the officer continued his - stomping on his head, his chest, his stomach... kicking him between the legs... moving hysterically, screaming incomprehensibly.

“You son of a bitch! You piece of shit! What are you plotting against the president? You think you’re men? You think you’re a first lieutenant in an army? You’re plotting against him? You spy! You agent! The president gives us bread, and you’re working against him. You dogs! You American spies! Israeli spies! You sons of whores! Out there you pretend to be men - and now you’re begging, you piece of shit! Cowards!”

To the rhythm of the officer’s shouting and his dance over the lieutenant’s body, the police’s blows grew more violent, more vicious, while the lieutenant’s screams and appeals for help grew softer and softer.

It was not long before the lieutenant was stretched out next to the brigadier general. *Even now, I don’t know what happened to him. Did he die, or not? Did the prison authorities have orders to kill the officers when they arrived, or during these ‘welcoming’ ceremonies?*

Now it was our turn. “Death comes to those who no longer pray,” was a phrase I had often heard from the Islamists, so often I was sick of it. But now it really was our turn, those of us with university degrees, certificates, bachelor’s degrees, diplomas, master’s degrees, doctorates.

The doctors drank the sewage and swallowed it, the engineers drank the sewage and swallowed it, the lawyers, the university professors, even the film director. I drank the sewage and swallowed it. The taste: I cannot describe. And the strange thing is, not one of us who drank it vomited. It became the one thing we had in common: we all had a university degree, and we had all drunk the sewage.

More than thirty of them, each *falaqa* carried by two *baladiyat*, and in front of them thirty police and thirty whips, and more... more... cruelty, pain, screams.

Pain. Pressure. Defeat. Cruelty. Death.

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More than thirty cries of pain. Subjugation. Escaping from the mouths of more than thirty cultured, educated men. More than thirty heads, every one of them holding hopes and dreams and ambitions, every one of them screaming, thirty wolf howls. The roar of more than thirty lions would not be louder than the cries of these cultured men, they would not be more savage, more bestial.

My cries were lost in this forest of screams and voices, the crashing of whips on our feet... the waves grew higher.

I called out to the president to save me. They beat me harder. I realized I wasn't supposed to defile his Excellency's name with my dirty mouth.

I cried out for the Prophet.

A blow to my head, and the officer thundered with incomprehensible rumblings.

"Mohammad's the one who got us into this mess!"

A series of blows, and a punch.

I saw him walking away from me, slowly.

"Please, sir! I'm begging you! Just a word, please!"

Waves of pain rose higher and higher, crashed upon me, harder and harder, he was walking away, further and further, I screamed as loud as I could -

"I'm not Muslim, sir. I'm Christian. I'm Christian. Sir, please, I'm begging you, please, sir, please. I'm a Christian!"

Slowly, he stopped. My voice stood out, among all those voices. He heard it. He came back. So slowly. He got close to me. He raised his right hand to the policeman - enough.

*My fate was bound to a word from the mouth of this officer, this officer who barely knew how to read.*

His eyes narrowed.

"You're a Christian?"

"Yes, sir - yes. Thank you, God bless you sir."

"A Christian, and you joined the Muslim Brotherhood?"

"No, no, no - I'm not in the Muslim Brotherhood, sir."

"Well then why did they bring you here? Like this? You liar! In front of God - you piece of filth... if those bastards deserve to die once, you'll die twice over. Come on men, beat him harder! A Christian who joined the Muslim Brotherhood!"

He left, the three policemen beat my feet more furiously, the fourth policeman's whip rained down on my naked thighs.

The spasms of pain shook me harder. The flesh of my thighs was thin, not like the thick soles of my feet. Strangled by my cries, for a moment I fell silent, trying to catch my breath and fill my lungs to scream again. A cloud of red gathered before my eyes. The pain was unbearable.

The officer having failed me, I turned to God. There was no other savior. In times of hardship and hopelessness, man turns to God, and so did I, praying he would deliver me from evil. On the path of righteousness, I was in the greatest depths of faith and reverence.

“Lord, save me! You are the Savior, deliver me from their hands.”

Adrift in my mind, I spoke these soundless words, and they emerged, rushing towards the heavens.

My strength faded, my ability to scream left me, the pain became sharp as razor blades. I saw the whips rising high above me. I waited for them. If they fell upon my body, I would surely die. I did not have the energy to stand any more pain. Death... I pleaded with God.

“Dear God, let me die. Let me die! Save me from this agony.”

It was now death I hoped for! I wanted only death... but even death was beyond my grasp.

The whips rose and fell. The red cloud, the rosy skies, the pain faded. The screams faded. A faint wave of tingling and numbness descended from my feet over the rest of my body.

Numbness overtook me. A sweet wave of calm washed over me. The whips rose and fell. Delicious pain. I felt my tense body fall slack, and then I passed out.