





# BANIPAL

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## Feature on Jordanian Literature

*Amman, Arab cultural capital 2002*

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# The Poppy

*Excerpt from a novel, translated by Yasir Suleiman*

## Chapter 1

**L**earning poems by heart, that twin brother of childhood! I lost this skill after poets lost the ability to navigate the seas of poetic metres, resorting instead to prose poetry, playing with ideas and building worlds out of sand. Memory retains a few lines. This morning I remembered fondly what the poetess Nujum al-Ghanim once said: "My hair is turning white with the piling on of years, but my memories echo with the vigour of youth."

Isn't this wonderful?

I liked her prose poetry, although the famous poet al-Mutanabbi stood guarding the gates of my literary sensibility. Strange ideas attack me. Are they genuine ideas? Or are they merely questions and riddles to occupy myself with? What have I got to do with poetry or prose? All I have is this road that stretches in front of me. Who can claim that this well-constructed road lined with short, fruit-laden palm trees is a straight road?

This is what it seems like. But the truth may be different. What appears as normal and routinely familiar may in fact be a dangerous matter for which we are totally unprepared.

Again, where do these ideas that swirl hazily in my head come from? What is so important about what is happening now? What's new?

Thousands of women will stop impulsively at this very hour, and on such an afternoon, in long and indistinct streets. They will pick up

bargains from shops whose gaudy windows attract those who are looking for something, anything.

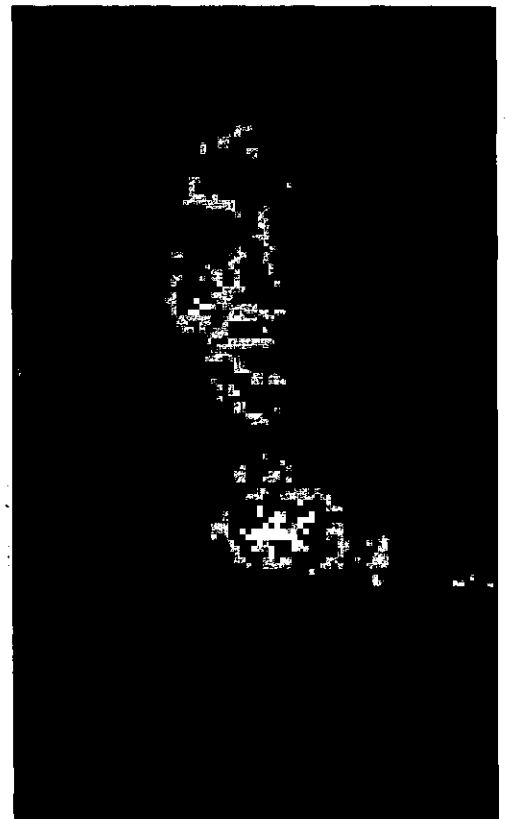
Thousands of them, at the same time and in different places may do this. In fact this happens all the time. It is in fact so mundane there are no 'ifs' or 'buts' about it. This is exactly what happens on a scorching Gulf afternoon in this endless and well-maintained street, a street planned by an engineer and built by hundreds of skilled labourers. This is a mundane matter in a new city in which everything glitters. It is definitely mundane on this straight road.

For a moment this interval seems like a crossroads or a sharp curve. The car I am driving has no idea what is going on inside me. Why do I have this strange taste in the middle of my throat? A sharp bitter taste! The car is driving smoothly. I don't know what is going on in this world! My soul is gliding as usual on this boring path along a straight, well-constructed and endless road.

There is a curve which no one sees or understands. It is not for us to judge or understand curves. We are not responsible for road engineering in this universe. We drive and go round curves; that's all. Curves are curves. They are usually found in straight roads, their natural

homes. They wouldn't be curves if they weren't. We shouldn't be able to see curves before we approach them. They should surprise us. How would a pedestrian believe that the earth is round if his feet and eyes didn't assert this, especially when he walks in a straight line and doesn't tumble like a ball? Is the earth flat or oval, going round and round endlessly, cheating us into believing that it moves in a straight line?

The earth is flat. This is how we perceive it. Our senses tell us this. It is flat in spite of what the geographers and astronomers say and think. No one gives a toss about



what they say.

A host of trivial ideas toss and turn in my head; ideas that take hold of me when I have nothing to do and from which I escape only because of the dangers of driving. I become alert and concentrate on the road with all my senses.

The road ahead of me is flat. Nothing is there except the flimsy shadows of palm trees. The sun is in the middle of the sky, veering westwards a little as if preparing gingerly for sunset.

The scorching mid-day sun! In this hell one yearns for some greenery. There is greenery around me. The trees are green, but I don't feel that. They look like a huge and frozen painting. I need to see fresh and tender green colours. Trees with fresh smells and rustling leaves! Green colours the sun doesn't impose on me by force!



The car shook violently before it came to a complete halt. I pressed hard on the brakes, really hard. The tyres screeched and I could smell burning rubber. This must be from the brakes. Why did I stop so dangerously? This is so unusual. I didn't look in the mirror to judge the situation properly. Divine Providence was on my side. The road was empty.

Did the green colours distract me, catching me like a prey? Did they beckon to me? A pale green colour passed in front of me. I saw it from the windscreen before I could see the clear blue skies and the deceptive remains of a desert that was once here.

I thought that my flat in the middle of the tall, concrete building had no oxygen. I have no time to look after any plants, but one houseplant is bearable. It may add a touch of beauty to the lounge especially if I place it between the two chairs in that cold corner.

I got out of the car. My eyes were fixed on a shop window which caught my attention, attracting me to it in a stupid way. The road was empty, so I didn't park the car properly. I parked it

on the pavement, thinking I wouldn't be long. The engine was running and the air-conditioning was on, keeping the car cool against the heat and the humidity that always rushed in when I opened the door.

Tens of flowerpots! With a smile on her face, a smart woman came up and asked if she could help me. I looked around nonchalantly, completely bored. I muttered something.

"Anything, anything that does not require constant attention."

She smiled for no reason. This is perhaps what shop assistants are like! She led me to the middle of the shop. With little enthusiasm, I said: "This one! This one is fine!"

She ran her fingers over the leaves and exchanged a few pleasant words with me for no reason whatsoever. "You have good taste," she said. "This plant does not need direct light. It just needs watering once a week." I picked up the plant with its wide leaves. This green thing will fill the space between the two chairs. There was a household palm tree-like plant, a short and neat one. I pointed to it as though I was interested. The shop assistant nodded. I was embarrassed because I was buying a plant whose name I didn't know. But not every one knows the names of all the plants. Perhaps in the past our mothers had done. Now these plants are no more than green leaves for decoration; plants without names.

I opened the car. I put the first plant on the front seat. Then I opened the back door to let the smiling lady put the other plant on the rear seat. I went back with her to the shop. I paid for the two plants with a huge grin on my face. These pleasantries lighten the atmosphere. I went back to the car with the same big grin on my face. I felt as though I was in a park, and that I now own some greenery.

The pale green colour was filling the air around me again. I didn't look at the light before entering the shop. The flickering light worried me. It may be that the intense heat

causes the light to flicker. The light was dimmed when the man appeared. I saw him leaving the plant shop. He was walking fast as if he feared not to catch up with me. He stood near the windscreen and later moved to the front off-side window. He knocked gently. He came closer. He smiled. In the other hand he carried a plant with wide, sword-like leaves and a big lilac flower. I shook my head signalling gratitude and objection. He knocked on the window again and came close, almost touching me. I switched the electric windows on. The window rolled all the way down. He stepped back. I could see his face, slim and pale with piercing eyes, slim lips and a few hairs here and there. His fair, almost fair skin ... Gently struggling against a strange fear that filled my heart for a few moments, I said:

"No! I don't need any more plants."

He laughed like a shy child. My fear disappeared. He shook his head and said: "Please, this plant is for you as a present from the shop."

I didn't want to take it. But I felt besieged by his big eyes, so I took it. "Thank you! Please put it in the back."

He opened the back door, and put the plant next to the one on the rear seat. His head was close to the floor when his voice reverberated. He said: "Put in direct sunlight! It likes the sun!"

He pulled his body out and shut the door. I left with three plants, imagining the joy they will spread throughout my colourless lounge. I felt very relaxed. I turned the radio on. I could hear Fairuz's voice coming at me like a spear recoiling from the past. I cut across the road. No one laughed.



I put the three plants near the entrance of my flat. I forgot them as I turned to my kitchen duties. I could hear the children play; but no one paid attention to the new verdant-green plants. I remem-