

A Translation into English of AL-FUZAI's¹ "Breakdown Time"²

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ABSTRACT

Khalil I. Al-Fuzai (1940) is a Saudi writer who published few collections of stories. In these stories he manages to introduce his Arabian society in a simple, frank way (see Dohal 2013). One of these stories is "Breakdown Time." I chose to translate this story for it is a good representation of what Al-Fuzai has written (Dohal, 2018 & 2019). In addition, it is about the Arabian culture; it tells how a man can propose for a woman's hand.

Keywords: short story, Saudi, Al-Fuzai, "Breakdown Time"

INTRODUCTION

Hamdan sends his friend; the old man to ask for the hand of a girl whose brother expresses his hesitance of her approval. When the old man tells Hamdan of what he has heard, "like a storm, the news hits Hamdan, (and) a wave of grief devastates him."

Later, the old man meets the girl's brother who surprises him, saying: "It seems that I was hasty in response yesterday ... I approached her regarding this matter, and she accepted without hesitation. And if Hamdan does still wish to marry my sister, I have no objection." Going back to Hamdan, the old friend finds him "a still body."³

TRANSLATION

Breakdown Time

A solemn evening is heavy with sadness . .⁴ void of the noise that dyed its moments in the past with a color of glamour . . and memory during the seasons of dryness tends to recall pictures of a distant yesterday . . they flash, shining in the darkness of despair . . like flowers that spring up in the swamps, in order to further confirm his suffering . . . Fleeing from the prison of disappointments that are piled up surrounding him in all directions . . his frequent stumbles give him more strength and challenge, so he has resisted for a long time and is still resisting . . until his swords have become blunt, and his ammunition has run out, and the days have deprived him of their armor which he used in face of difficulties. And amid troubles . . memories insist on breaking into his sad world, and the past that has been full of victories cannot remove the sad clouds from the skies of his life. He has learned not to feed off of his old honors, because that will give him nothing but sorrow . . but memories sneak into his mind, without finding release . . as if they refuse to become completely forgotten.

This evening is full of memories . . that exert pressure on his nerves . . so he hesitates between revealing and concealing . . releasing and alluding . . will his friend be surprised if he approaches the matter?

His offerings diminish . . his friends with whom he used to stand while facing ordeals . . leave him alone . . his brothers whom he helped . . do not ask about him anymore. As for his father, he died while hope was on his lips, as if the future was an open page in front of him . . so he was a herald for what follows:

"Oh, my son . . it is time to marry . . age proceeds, and time does not stop, and you are insisting not to marry!"

And age proceeds, time does not stop, and the idea of marriage is moving from the list of possible things . . to that of impossible ones . . after circumstances have changed . . all circumstances, and he has lost his high status in society . . except for his elder friend who serves him . . shares his misfortunes as he shared his good times in the past. He does not ask for wages, becoming satisfied with food, clothes and housing . . and how can he ask for anything once his master's affairs have declined, and time has turned against him. Life has shown him its other side, and comfort has left him as a healthy person flees from a scabby one. He has no income except for the rent of a two-story building . . time has changed its attraction, so it looks sad like its owner, yet it is all that is left for him from his huge estate and excessive riches.

This solemn evening full of sorrow appears to have a new color, and its rhythm is different from the routine of the past days. His elder friend asks, *"Tonight you look speechless and hesitant . . what's up?"*

Yes, something keeps his mind busy . . and this physiognomy he admires, of course among other things, in his life friend, who witnessed with him the days of prosperity, and rode with him the back of happiness . . they have been friends since childhood, their relationship has been nothing but a wonderful brotherhood, one is in the front, the other in the back . . serving . . and supervising personal affairs; even after the master experienced the ordeal, their relationship does not change and keeps its old rituals. Many things including celibacy bring them together. Hamdan complains, *"At the beginning of summer . . flies and mosquitoes multiply."*

His old friend is certain that something distracts Hamdan's mind . . does not comment . . awaits Hamdan to tell what he wants, and reveal what he hides in his chest . . and it is his old friend who knows his way of talking; he moves from one subject into another even if there is no connection . . . After waiting for the old man to comment in vain, Hamdan continues, *"High temperature is a sign of dates ripening . . this year's season seems plentiful . . do you think the boys will bring us some dates from the big orchard?"*

The boys are his brothers and the big orchard is the inheritance his father left, but he gave up his share of all inheritance to his brothers, because he did not need it then . . and without awaiting his friend's response to his question, Hamdan himself continues, answering his earlier question, *"I do not think they will do so . . for a year I have not seen any of them . . I have never even seen their children. Your friend, the fisherman, came back from his travels . . I saw him in the souq5 yesterday. He greeted me eagerly . . he is a nice man . . his elder sister is still living with him . . I hear that she is*

always in conflict with his wife . . what a poor . . where can she go . . no child . . and no relative . . no husband and no house . . do you think she still somewhat beautiful? I do not think she is forty yet . . I remember that she was pretty when she was young . . why has she not married yet? I have not married either, I am about fifteen years older than she is . . it is not that much difference in age . . if we had a chance to marry, our children would be in schools by now."

The older man did not interrupt him, and realized what he wanted to say as he talked; becoming more frank . . he continues, *"Sometimes we ignore a blessing that is beside us . . what do you think if I ask for her hand, will she accept?"*

He does not wait for the response, but he continues as usual answering his question, *"Why not . . I need her and she needs me . . each needs the other, why not spend the rest of our time together? . . it is true that I am poor . . this might be a reason for her brother to refuse the idea of marriage . . yet he is your friend, and you are relatives . . he respects your opinion, and you may be able to convince him to approve the idea of our marriage."*

He awaits a clear response from his old friend, who squats not far from him, and it seems that he is surprised to hear such a direct request; he murmurs a few words that Hamdan does not understand, so Hamdan incites him to clarify, *"What did you say? . . I want to hear clearly your opinion!"*

Confusion resurfaces, but he gathers up his courage, and recovers his composure and says, *"It is a good idea . . since this is your wish, never mind . . I will talk to her brother, and I do not think he will reject your proposal, and why would he refuse since he always wishes to get rid of his sister so as to please his wife? Tomorrow I will talk with him."*

Hamdan's features shine, and joy overtakes him . . he who thought that joy had left him forever . . happiness fills his heart, and it was he who thought that he would not know it again . . he spends his night with happiness filling in his flanks . . he dreams of many things that refresh his feelings . . so branches of hope grow in his self, after storms of despair have stripped of it any sign of hope. The next day, when the old man meets his relative the fisherman and conveys Hamdan's wish to him . . the fisherman hesitates, and rules out his sister's acceptance . . everyone knows what has happened to Hamdan after glory left him. The old man believes that the fisherman is refusing—in an indirect way—the idea of having his sister marry Hamdan. And this is a stumbling beginning. When they meet, the old man tells his friend, *"And why do you choose this particular woman? There are others; you may marry one of them."*

Hamdan wonders, "Does this mean that my request has been rejected?"

"I accosted her brother . . but he refused . . frankly I do not know why . . I thought he wanted to get rid of her."

Like a storm, the news hits Hamdan, a wave of grief devastates him . . he feels blood boiling in his veins . . anger deeply moves him . . he wonders whether he has become so low in people's eyes. Have they lost all confidence in him? It is unbelievable he could be contemptible to such an extent.

Hamdan does not speak because such a surprise overwhelms him, and loads all the world's worries on his shoulders until he feels crushed beneath their pressure . . gets lost in a maze of sadness, rupture, misery and distraction . . whoever looked at him would see a different person from the one whom all knew . . he is quiet, submissive, surrendering to his destiny.

His eyes shift, and a strange yellowness rises over his face . . and he starts murmuring some incomprehensible words so that the old man has to leave . . relying on time to heal his friend's wounds, because he thinks that his friend will return to his senses and go to bed . . as soon as this disturbance leaves his mind.

After *Isha Salat*⁶, the old man meets his relative and repeats what he said before, confirming Hamdan's wish to marry the fisherman's sister. How happy he is when he hears the fisherman reply, *"It seems that I was hasty in response yesterday . . I approached her regarding this matter, and she accepted without hesitation. And if Hamdan does still wish to marry my sister, I have no objection."*

His heart is full of joy, because this news will make Hamdan glad . . and will be a blessing to suit the happiness that will overflow in him when he hears it. He used to bestow a gift on the old man whenever he came back with glad tidings, though the glad tidings were few in the last few years. Because Hamdan went to sleep early, the old man decides to tell him this news the next morning . .

And as usual in the morning . . he enters Hamdan's bedroom to wake him for *Fajr Salat*⁷ . . in a low voice he calls him . . then in a loud manner . . he repeats his call . . quietly shakes him . . then violently and repeatedly shaking him . . but there is no answer. He becomes speechless with shock, looking at his friend . . who has become a still body.

1/9/1996⁸

CONCLUSION

In the above story, Al-Fuzai depicts the way in which a female is wed in some Arabian societies. Usually the guardian is the one whose decision is final in those patriarchal communities; the brother in the story expresses his doubt of her approval even before consulting the sister whether she wants to marry that particular person or not. More than this, the writer explores the psychological consequences of such behavior; the reaction might be disastrous for both individuals involved (see Dohal 2013).

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES:

- 1- KHALIL I. AL-FUZAI (1940-) is a literary writer from Saudi Arabia. In his writings, he introduced his culture, addressing many social, cultural, and religious issues he saw in his society.
- 2- "Breakdown Time": this story was translated from the following Arabic source:
Al-Fuzai, Khalil. *Breakdown Time and Other Stories*. لحظة انهيار و قصص أخرى Tabouk (Saudi Arabia): Tabouk Literary Club, 2000: 35-47.
- 3- This introduction might help readers understand the context.
- 4- . . Every now and then there are two dots in the source text.

- 5- "Souq", in Arabic, means market. Here a literary translation of the original is intended to keep the flavor of **foreignization** as Lawrence Venuti proposed in his book The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation. London & New York: Routledge, 2008.
- 6- *Isha Salat*: Muslims' Night Prayer.
- 7- *Fajr Salat*: Muslims' Morning Prayer.
- 8- 1/6/1996: This date is found in the source text; it might be a reference to the date of writing the story.

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