Hanan Al-Shaykh

The Keeper of the Virgins

(LEBANON)

One of the women wondered aloud if he was a dwarf in every way. The other women sitting at the intersection burst out laughing. Even though they prayed to God to forgive them, their laughter grew louder before the dwarf was out of sight.

They had grown used to seeing him every morning shortly after they set to work, bending over the hibiscus bushes to gather the wine-colored blossoms. He would go by with a confident step, heading for the convent, where the pure ones lived, books and magazines tucked under his arm, a cloth bundle containing his food for the day held firmly in his hand. He was content to greet the hibiscus pickers as he passed, although they welcomed him enthusiastically and offered him a glass of tea or some warm bread. He knew it was because he was a dwarf and they felt sorry for him, but he had a great sense of his own importance. Besides keeping up with the politics of his own country and the Arab world in general, he had broadened his interests to take in the whole planet. He studied thoroughly and remembered everything he learned, delved into dictionaries, read novels, both translated and local, and underlined passages in pencil when the subject matter appealed to him or he liked the sound of the words. He wrote poetry and prose, and sent it to newspapers and magazines, even though not a single line of it had ever been published; and he had been going to the convent and waiting by the main gates in its outer wall for a year or more.

He would sit in the generous shade of a sycamore tree or lie on a blanket he had brought with him beneath its spreading branches, staring at the convent walls. He had learned the shape of their dusty red stones by heart; their uneven surfaces and the way they were arranged reminded him of a tray of the vermicelli pastries called *kunafa.* He spent these long stretches of time either reading, sometimes to himself and sometimes out loud, or building a fire with a few sticks to make tea, or waiting for the hoopoe, which appeared out of nowhere from the direction of the trees and the water or from the bare, stony desert. Every now and then he would stare hard at the iron gates of the convent, hearing some kind of a commotion on the other side. But he was

convinced that it was a figment of his imagination because the place was always calm and still again at once, as if there had been no interruption.

But as the days went by he discovered from one of the men building the nearby tombs, who sat and chatted with him for a while each evening, that the noise he heard was real enough, as the nuns used to sweep the convent yard every now and then. This ruined his concentration for some considerable length of time: he could not read with such enthusiasm, or savor a choice sentence or the hot sweetness of a glass of tea or the food he brought with him. He became entirely focused on the iron gates, as if by staring at them he could melt them and make them collapse before his eyes.

During his first few weeks of frequenting the monastery, he had tried to have a conversation with the nuns to persuade them to open the gate, but each time his request had been refused in dumb silence. He had asked if he could sweep the yard for nothing, worship in the church, confess, but still he met with no response from behind the closed gates. Gradually he became convinced that everybody had joined forces to concoct a lie about the existence of this convent, because he was a dwarf, and he knew very well what people thought about dwarves. They were all lying to him: the tomb builders, the hibiscus women, his family, the wind, which must have cooperated with them by making some noise behind the abandoned gates; Georgette's mother, who had lamented long and loud because her daughter had joined the pure ones and their door had closed behind her, never to open again.

Georgette's family must be hiding the truth. Georgette must have gone mad and been locked away, for just before the rumor went around that she had entered the convent, she would only leave the house to walk over thorns until her feet bled.

The dwarf became convinced that many people profited from his visits to the convent. His mother regularly rose at dawn to get his food ready, as if he had a job to go to. His younger brother must have heaved a sigh of relief at this new routine of his, for however much he might love the dwarf, he had to be forced to let him participate in his nights out with his friends. They all used to sit in the dwarf's presence as if they were on eggs, wary of any joke or chance phrase that might offend him or hurt his feelings. Still, he couldn't remember his brother ever praising him for his determination when he saw him preparing to go to the convent, nor even the hibiscus women, who must have relished the chance to invent hilarious, irreverent stories about him. And what did the tomb builders think of him? He couldn't bear to let these thoughts torment him anymore, and hurried resolutely to bang on the gates with his giant hands. As usual, he asked for Georgette. He wanted to see her, to thank her for the affection she had heaped on him. Time stood still and he felt as if all the power in his body was in his huge, solid fist with its wide-apart fingers. As he was about to start hammering on the gates again, he heard a soft voice whispering to him that Georgette said hello but seeing her was out of the question.

From that moment on he began to have a fixation about the convent. The iron gates, bolted and barred, had an obsessive hold over him. Georgette's mother had wailed that she would never see her daughter again even when she died. How did they exist in there for all those years without being tempted to step over the threshold for a moment?

The gates, unmoved by his devotion to them, had opened a few times when he was not there; he had discovered their treachery by looking for evidence each morning, and had found tire tracks made by cars, trucks and mule-drawn carts. He brought his face close to the ground to find out whether the gates had been opened wide or only on one side, biting his lip in remorse because he had missed a chance to see the pure ones as they opened the gates and took the things and paid for them. Where did they get the money from?

As time passed, the dwarf grew ever more obsessed with the convent and its inhabitants. He no longer tried to explain it, and those who saw him waiting regularly at the gates ceased to worry about him. No doubt they told themselves that it was something to do with the way dwarves looked at things, and their different mentality.

Then one night the dwarf failed to return home. His mother wept loudly, blaming herself for not stopping his visits to the convent before. She was sure that a wild animal had blocked his path and eaten him in one mouthful. His brother suspected that a group of acrobats had kidnapped him and taken him to the city to train him to work in the circus.

He set off for the convent at high speed. He passed the hibiscus gatherers and they directed him to it. One of them winked at him, so he thought better of asking if they had seen the dwarf. The moment he stood before the gates he was seized by a violent sense of apprehension. One last grain of hope had remained, but there was no sign of the dwarf, only the tree and the blanket that he had hung over a branch and the stone where he used to sit; a few empty soap-powder cartons, which had been blown up against the walls; and crushed and broken coffins, some lined with black material and emblazoned with white crosses. The wind whistled and in the distance he could see the builders at work on new tombs. He shouted his brother's name and was answered by silence. He began to blame himself. He had known that his brother was running away from reality by taking refuge at the convent, making everyone think that he was strong enough to do the daily round-trip on foot, about four hours in all, so that he could come home proud of having had some adventures.

Adventures? The roads were always the same: deserted, except for stretches of date palms, canals and the sounds of frogs croaking and an occasional donkey braying.

The brother stumbled hurriedly over the remains of human bones and crumbling skulls and entered a burial chamber with no roof or doors. He read on its whitewashed walls, "Remember, O Lord, your obedient servant"; "Remember, O Lord, your erring servant"; "Remember, O Lord, your righteous servant, your repentant servant." Suddenly he burst into tears, mortified that deep down inside he had blessed his brother's daily visits to the convent. He had not wanted it to be known that he was the dwarf's brother, that he lived under the same roof as the dwarf. He rushed outside and over to the tomb builders. One of them was painting a tomb a reddish-brown color and he

asked him if he had seen the dwarf. The man pointed toward the convent. He turned and ran back and pounded on the iron gates, calling out the dwarf's name. To his astonishment he heard his voice: "Yes?"

"Thank God you're safe," he said, crying tears of joy. "Come on, let's go home, or your mother will do herself mischief."

"Don't worry," replied the dwarf. "Tell her that I've become the nuns' watchman. I'm happy. Don't worry."

The dwarf had only gained access to the convent by jumping in. Not by bouncing in off a springy bedstead, an idea he had quickly banished from his mind, nor by piling the wrecked coffins one on top of another. Instead he had jumped onto the shoulders of the Lord Bishop, who had come from the city to pay his annual visit to the convent with several crates of luggage. The dwarf had planned for this moment for a long time during his vigils by the gate. He didn't know where he had found the courage, agility and speed of thought that had enabled him to leap out as soon as he heard the car engine and alight on the hood before it stopped, like a winged insect, then jump on the Lord Bishop and relieve him of one of the crates and rush off with it, his heart beating with almost unbearable ferocity. He hurried disbelievingly through the open gates into the courtyard. To force himself to take in what was happening, he stood stock-still at the gates once they had been closed again, seeing them from the inside for the first time. He was certain that they would be opened again shortly and he would be hurled back outside. But things no longer hinged on him. It was as if he had disappeared from sight. The nuns began to gather around in their white habits and crowns of artificial flowers, bowing their heads before the Lord Bishop, who looked like a big black bird, and bending over to kiss his hand.

They were like brides, some of them extremely young and pretty. As they stood in line, their heads drooping bashfully, they resembled a row of beautiful narcissus. For a few moments the dwarf felt embarrassed and scared. He tried to suppress his breathing, which had suddenly become audible. Then he found the Lord Bishop was looking at him. "Is this the one?" he was asking.

One of them, the senior nun, answered him humbly, but with affection, "Yes, My Lord."

Turning back to him the bishop said, "The nuns have told me about you. You have been blessed. You will watch over them."

The dwarf felt awkward in the bishop's presence. He didn't know how to answer him. He had been immensely curious to see what was behind the gates; it was like the time he split a battery in two to see what was inside it. And now the bishop was offering him a job as a handyman to the pure ones, and he found himself agreeing to stay in the convent and oversee the cultivation of the fruit and vegetables, without giving the matter more than a moment's thought.

He hadn't imagined the convent would be like this. It bore no relation to its outer walls and to the countryside around it, which was all sand, and the color of sand. The dwarf developed an attachment to the colors in the convent in his early days there. Some of them he was seeing for the first time, sculpted on

the walls, or in paintings of animals, bats, angels, flowers, and women holding drums and wearing ornate brocade dresses, flying through the skies or in boats on the sea, with lances and daggers and swords in the background. Then gradually his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, and he began to see clearly and especially to notice how the nuns lit up the place in their white clothes.

A week went by and the dwarf still hadn't guessed which was Georgette, because they all looked the same. Humbly, they took turns to kneel and pray before the statue of the crucified Christ until their eyes were almost as big as goose eggs. They didn't leave the statue alone day or night, massaging its feet with rose water, putting compresses soaked with oil and perfume on the nails of the crucifix, lighting candles, burning incense, and raising their voices in sweet, sorrowful chanting. They dedicated themselves to their love so wholeheartedly that he once had the feeling that all they did was hover in the air awaiting their turn to cling to the figure on the cross for a few moments before going back to their places. He didn't know why, on a certain day, they brought in a doll and dipped it in water, praying all the time, then rubbed it with colored stones that gave off an enticing fragrance, dried it with an embroidered cloth and dressed it in white baby clothes, which they had taken from a cloth bag studded with precious stones and tied with ropes of pearls.

They were eaten up heart and soul with their love for Christ. This was true love, the like of which he had never found in any novel, translated or otherwise. Never before had he encountered such passion and devotion. Was this what they called sacrifice? The dwarf checked himself. Of course. They had sacrificed the world and their families for the sake of this love, or for the sake of competing for this love. Closing his eyes, he decided to respond to their love, to help them realize that Christ knew about them and the way they showed their love for him. Moreover, Christ had sent the dwarf as a messenger to them. Wasn't that what the old nun had said? He would help those who were waiting their turn to love Christ by doing their embroidery with them, or by changing the linen in the church. He would snatch the washing out of the boiling water to save them from having to do it. He would have liked to hang it up to dry in the scorching sun, but he wasn't tall enough to reach the washing line. He would light the coals and fan them until they were glowing embers and load them into the flatiron. He would plant flowers and pick them for the garlands they wore on their heads, so that they didn't have to use artificial flowers. He would feed the hens with grain day and night until they were bursting with health and well-being and laid the choicest eggs in the country. He'd polish the nuns' shoes until they could see their faces in them. He'd make their mud-brick beds for them and be close to their sheets—for Christ must smell that they were clean.

At this the dwarf halted his flow of enthusiasm and supressed the leap in his heart, as he did every time he heard the rustle of their bare feet on the coolness of the earth floor. He closed his eyes firmly as if this also closed his ears and steadied his heartbeat, which broke away from its usual rhythm at these unpredictable thoughts.

After a few months the dwarf found that he had become quite used to these expectant brides of Christ as they moved around him holding whispered conversations, sighing gently, smiling at him, and not concealing their bad moods in his presence. It was as if he had become one of them, and what was more he had pledged himself to the virgins, swearing that nothing would separate him from them but death. When he died he would put their love to the test. They would either return him to his family or put him in the burial chamber, where he had gone one day with the senior nun to help her sweep the floor. He wouldn't have been able to see anything, but the old woman had lit a little candle and held it up to a casket on a high wooden shelf and raised the lid. He gasped in fright at the sight of a bony frame. The ribs were plainly visible and some flesh still clung around the hands. He heard the old nun's voice whispering, "You shouldn't be frightened. You were sent to us by the Lord."

And so it was. The dwarf only looked at the iron gates occasionally, when he heard his mother's cough and knew that she still had not lost hope. At first this caused him pain, especially when he pictured her sitting on the stone where he had sat. He heard his brother calling him day after day, banging on the gates, urging him to come home. But the dwarf followed instructions, did not reply and turned back to his work. He was growing used to this obligatory link being severed, so that he could concentrate on what he wanted and not let the vibrations from the trivia of the outside world intrude and confuse him. However, when he pictured his mother and his brother taking turns to sit on the stone, he couldn't help thinking of the hoopoe and wondering whether it came to them as it used to come to him, from the direction of the green trees and the canal, or from the barren land, looking for bread crumbs.

Translated from the Arabic by Catherine Cobham

sits like the judge in his black robes at the palace of justice where she spent

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Hanan al-Shaykh (b. 1945)

Lebanese novelist, short-story writer, and playwright, one of the leading contemporary women writers in the Arab world. Hanan al-Shaykh's works deal with women's role in society, the relationship between the sexes, and the institution of marriage. Before turning to writing fiction, Al-Shaykh worked as a journalist in Beirut. Her novels, written in Arabic, have been translated into several languages, including English, French, Dutch, German, Danish, Italian, Korean, Spanish, and Polish.

> **"At that time Lebanese coins had a hole in the centre. I threaded some into a bracelet and, each time my hand brushed against a table, their jingling sound promised me maturity, control, freedom; promised me that I could cope with the neighbourhood children's taunts about my absent mother. The voice helped me to seduce them. I was like a magician: I told stories and did funny imitations. I could make them laugh."** (from *The Locust and the Bird: My Mother's Story*, 2005, translated from the Arabic by Roger Allen)

Hanan Al-Shaykh was born in Beirut and brought up in Ras al-Naba, a conservative and unfashionable sector of the town. Her mother, Kamila, was illiterate and married off at an early age. Rebellious and strongwilled, she eventually left her family to live with her lover, Muhammad. A few years after they married, Muhammad died in a car crash. "I can count the times I saw her as a child," al-Shayk wrote in *The Locust and the Bird: My Mother's Story* (2005). "When I did, it was as though she was a wild, chaotic neighbour. She had no authority over me." Al-Shaykh father, who worked long days at a jointly owned textile shop, was a devout Shia Muslim. Though he was forced out by his partner, he refused to bring the case to court, saying "God is my lawyer".

Al-Shaykh first attended Alamillah traditional Muslim girls' primary school and then the more sophisticated Ahliyyah School for Girls. She started to write, as she once said, to release her anger and frustration towards her father and brother, because they were able to restrict her freedom. Her teachers included Layla Baalbaki, whose novel *Ana ahya* (1958, I Am Alive), banned by the authorities, became a landmark in Lebanese women's fiction. In Saida her roommate in the boarding school was Leila Khaled, who later joined the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and became the first woman to hijack a plane. By the age of 16, al-Shaykh had already published essays in the newspaper *al-Nahar*. Between the years 1963 and 1966 she studied at the American College for Girls in Cairo.

While in Cairo, al-Shaykh had a love affair with a well-known and married Egyptian novelist, twice of her age. Back in Beirut she worked in television and as a journalist for *Al-Hasna'*, a women's magazine, and then for *al-Nahar* from 1968 to 1975. During the four years al-Shaykh lived in Egypt, she made her debut as a writer with *Intihar rajul mayyit*, which was published in 1970. It has nothing in common with a typical first novel – instead of being autobiographical it is narrated by a middle-

aged man. Through the narrator's obsessive desire for a young girl, al-Shaykh examines power relations between the sexes and patriarchal control.

Against the wishes of his father, al-Shaykh married a Christian man, and moved to Saudi Arabia, where her husband worked as a construction engineer. Her next novel, *Faras al-shaitan* (1971), was written when she lived in the Arabian Peninsula. It included biographical elements related to her extremely religious father, aspects of her own love story, and her subsequent marriage. The narration moves freely in time, and depicts the personal development of the heroine, Sarah, against the background of southern Lebanon. In 1976 al-Shaykh left Lebanon for London because of the civil war. Her home street in Beirut had been turned into a no-man's-land. Until 1982, she lived in Saudi Arabia and then settled permanently in London. She has frequently visited Lebanon and spent summers at Antibes in the south of France.

Al-Shaykh first came to international attention with *Hikayat Zahrah* (1980, The Story of Zahra), written in London. Because no publisher in Lebanon accepted the novel, she published it first at her own expense. The story operates on many different levels and uses many voices, but in the center is a bewildered and directionless young woman, Zahrah, who finds in the Lebanese Civil War an opportunity to escape oppression. Zahrah's family sends her to Africa to recover from two abortions and a nervous breakdown. She stays with her lecherous uncle, once active in Lebanese politics. To avoid his sexual advances she marries one of his associates. The marriage is loveless and she returns to devastated Beirut – as torn as herself. Chaos transforms her and she falls in love for the first time. But her lover is a sniper who shoots innocent passersby, and the pregnant Zahrah, who carries his own child, becomes one of his targets. *The Story of Zahra* was banned in most Arab countries. Some of her Lebanese readers rejected the book because it "gives a very wrong impression about Arab culture." *Boston Sunday Globe* praised it as "an original, moving and powerfully written novel, vividly illuminating the personal human tragedy of war and madness."

In the short story 'The Persian Carpet' al-Shaykh examined the effect of divorce on the children. The narrator and her sister visit their remarried mother. She notices a Persian carpet on the floor of the new home. It had disappeared from the old family house and her mother had accused an old man who used to repair cane chairs in the quarter. The daughter's relationship with her mother is shattered. "Again I looked at my mother and she interpreted my gaze as being one of tender longing, so she put her arms round me, saying: 'You must come every other day, you must spend the whole of Friday at my place.' I remained motionless, wishing that I could remove her arms from around me and sink my teeth into that white forearm. I wished that the moment of meeting could be undone and re-enacted, that she could again open the door and I could stand there – as I should have done – with my eyes staring down at the floor and my forehead in a frown." (from 'The Persian Carpet')

Misk al-ghazal (1989, Women of Sand and Myrrh) was chosen as one of the 50 Best Books of 1992 by *Publishers Weekly*. Set primarily in an expatriate community in an anonymous Middle-Eastern country, the

story tells of four women, each from her own perspective. Two of the women, Nur and Tamr, are Arabs from the unnamed country in question, one is Lebanese, and the fourth is American. Each woman has chosen a different path that reveals their struggle with the patriarchal order. Suha has a degree in Management Studies from the American University of Beirut. She feels disillusioned: "this wasn't the desert that I'd seen from the aircraft, nor the one I'd read about or imagined myself". Suha longs for the freedoms she had in Beirut and has a lesbian relationship; Tamr's success in opening a beauty shop is not easy; Nur is not allowed to travel alone; and the unhappily married Suzanne has a multitude of affairs. "The elaborate network of first-person narrative, in which the text allows the four women to speak in turn giving voice to the voiceless, reflects in its structure the compartmentalization of women and their struggle to break out of all forms of social confinement. The very structure of the novel in which each section conveys a sense of independence while at the same time being an integral part of the whole reflects the degree of sophistication in the authors feminist vision." (Sabry Hafez in *Contemporary World Writers*, ed. by Tracy Chevalier, 1993) The book was banned in several Middle Eastern countries.

Barid Bayrut (1992, Beirut Blues), a novel of correspondence, celebrated the resilience of the human spirit in the middle of the Lebanese Civil War. It consisted of ten letters "written" by Asmahan, a Muslim woman, and addressed either to specific persons, both living and dead, or places. The letters perhaps never reach their destination, but through them Asmahan has a small hope of transferring signs of culture over present devastation. Al-Shaykh's story collection, *I Sweep the Sun Off Rooftops*, was came out in English in 1998. In her short-stories al-Shaykh has criticized patriarchal notions of how Arab women should behave, but they also praise Arab cultures that give women a measure of power to negotiate their own realities. In 'A Season of Madness' a woman tries to gain her freedom by becoming mad, while her husband continues to live his life as normal. *Only in London* (2000) explores in comic light the lives of people caught between the ways of East and West. Lamis, a recently divorced Iraqi woman, has an affair with Nicholas, an Englishman who is an expert in Arabic and eastern antiquities. Another pair is Amira, a prostitute from Morocco, and Samir, a gay Lebanese. *The Locust and the Bird: My Mother's Story* (2005) was a family history about miserable marriage, survival, and love in a traditional patriarchal society. Toward the end of the story, al-Shaykh says: "My mother wrote this book. She is the one who spread her wings. I just blew the wind that took her on her long journey back in time."

For further reading: *The Arabic Novel* by Roger Allen (1982); *War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War* by Miriam Cooke (1987); *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of the Middle East* by Evelyne Accad (1990); 'The Fiction of Hanan al-Shaykh, Reluctant Feminist' by Charles Larson, in *Literary Quarterly of the University of Oklahoma*, 1 Winter (1991); *Contemporary World Writers*, ed. by Tracy Chevalier (1993); *Arab Women Novelists* by Joseph Zeidan (1995); *Encyclopedia of World Literature in the 20th Century*, Vol. 4, ed. by Steven R. Serafin (1999); 'Writing Self, Writing Nation: Imagined Geographies in the Fiction of Hanan al-Shaykh,' by Ann Marie Adams, in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 20, no. 2 (2001); *The Facts on File*

Companion to the World Novel: 1900 to the Present, edited by Michael Sollars, Arbolina Llamas Jennings (2008)

Selected works:

- Intihar rajul mayyit, 1970 (Suicide of a Dead Man)
- Faras al-shaytan, 1975 (The Devil's Horse)
- Hikayat Zahrah, 1980 - The Story of Zahra (translated by Peter Ford, 1994)
- Wardat al-sahra: qisas qasirah, 1982
- 'The Persian Carpet' in Arabic Short Stories, 1983 (translated by Denys Johnson-Davies)
- Misk al-ghazal, 1988 - Women of Sand and Myrrh (translated by Catherine Cobham, 1992)
- Barid Bayrut: riwayah, 1992 - Beirut Blues: A Novel (translated by Catherine Cobham, 1995)
- Aknusu al-shams an al-sutuh, 1994 - I Sweep the Sun off Rooftops: Stories (translated by Catherine Cobham, 1994)
- Dark Afternoon Tea, 1995 (play)
- Paper Husband, 1997 (play)
- Innaha Landan ya 'azizi: riwayah, 2001 - Only in London (translated by Catherine Cobham, 2000)
- Hikayati sharhun yatul: riwayah, 2005 - The Locust and the Bird: My Mother's Story (translated from the Arabic by Roger Allen, 2009)
- One Thousand and One Nights: A New Re-Imagining, 2011

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