

# Mohammed Mrabet

## DOCTOR SAFI

Safi lived by himself. It was a small village, and he lived the same as everyone else, except that he had a special pleasure, which was to take qoqa. He would collect all the red poppies he could find and carry them home. There he would pull off their petals and crush their two green seed pods in a cup with a stick. He would put a little of the qoqa pulp into the teapot, add tea, sugar and boiling water, and set the pot on the fire. When he took it off he would stuff fresh mint into the top of the pot. Finally he would pour himself a glass of the tea and take some snuff. But his snuff too had qoqa in it. He made a powder of the dried pods and sprinkled it in with the tobacco.

One day after he had drunk his tea and taken his snuff he was resting. From where he sat he could see his donkey in the courtyard outside, and as he looked at it he saw that it was not doing what it usually did. It rolled on the ground in a different way, and there was a little foam coming out of its mouth. Safi got up and went out to it. It was an old donkey and he knew its teeth were bad. He looked into its mouth, and then he pulled out four of its teeth.

You have a few good teeth left, he told the donkey. But it's all right. If I have to take them out too, I'll make you a set of false ones. You'll still be able to chew.

Later, at the end of the day, Safi was sitting with his friends in front of the village mosque. A taleb came by, holding his hand over his face. My tooth! he was crying. Safi, being full of qoqa and still remembering the teeth he had just pulled for the donkey, said to the taleb: Come home with me. I can pull your tooth.

He took the taleb with him to his house. There he told him to sit down on the mat, and he gave him a glass of his special tea. Then he had the taleb take a few pinches of his qoqa snuff.

Soon Safi said to the taleb: Open your mouth. Where's the tooth? Here? He tied a cord to it. Say *Al-lahi!* he told the taleb. Then he yanked out the tooth and gave him a glass of hot water with salt in it and told him to wash his mouth.

How much do I owe you? the taleb asked.

Safi was busy thinking. It's free this time, he told him. Because you're my first patient.

The taleb thanked him and went away. As Safi watched him go, he said to himself: And now I'm going to build myself a clinic.

On his extra land Safi began to build a shack. When it was finished he put benches along its walls. He bought three mirrors and a table to hold the pliers and knives. He filled several bottles with salted water. The room had two entrance doors side by side. On one he hung a sign which read: DOCTOR SAFI—PEOPLE, and on the other: DOCTOR SAFI—ANIMALS.

One afternoon not much later, a man came to the clinic with his wife. She wanted two teeth taken out. Safi was very full of qoqa, and he scarcely knew what he was doing. He tied the woman's hands behind her and bound her legs together before looking into her mouth.

Hold her head tight, he told the man. Then he took a pair of pliers in his hand. Open your mouth. Is this the tooth?

Yes! she cried.

Say *Al-lah!* And while she was saying it he pulled out the tooth. The woman began to groan. He gave her a glass of salt water. Then he reached in and pulled out the other tooth. This time she fainted and fell on the floor.

When Safi saw her lying there with blood coming from her mouth he was afraid. But he went to his room and got some soft soap to stuff into the holes he had left in her gums. When she came to she began to talk to her husband, and it was not many minutes before she had masses of foam coming out of her mouth. This frightened her husband, but Safi merely kept working. He brought in a brazier and some benzoin. With the woman sitting beside the pot of coals, he sprinkled the pieces of benzoin over the fire, and she breathed the smoke. Finally he gave her a glass of qoqa tea. Drink it while it's hot, he told her.

Soon the woman was telling her husband that all the pain had gone away. And Safi said to himself: I've found the right medicine for teeth.

How much? said the man. Safi took the two teeth in his hand and looked at them for a while. The big one will be five rials and the small one two.

Another day a man came and knocked on his door. Salaam aleikoum, said the farmer. I have a cow and I think her teeth are bad.

Come in, said Safi. And bring the cow through the other door. The man led his cow into the office. Safi opened her mouth and looked in. He could not tell whether anything was the matter or not. He got a piece of bread and spread it thick with qoqa paste. After she had eaten it, he opened her mouth again and began to tap her teeth one by one with a hammer.

There's nothing wrong with her teeth, he told the farmer. Here's some medicine for her. She'll feel better. He gave the farmer a mass of qoqa paste.

How much do I owe you?

A rial and a half.

The man paid and left. When he got home he gave the cow the qoqa and put her in with the other animals, but the qoqa soon got into her head. She began to kick and bellow, and she attacked the other livestock. When the farmer went out to see what was happening, she came running at him and tossed him into the air.

Then she turned and pushed one horn into his thigh and began to tear open the flesh. The neighbors came running and tied the cow up.

We must take him to see Dr. Safi, said the neighbors. They carried the farmer to the clinic and Safi looked at his leg. He got a needle and some heavy thread. Lie still, he told the farmer. I'm going to sew up your leg.

He put the needle into the man's flesh, and the man began to yell. He pulled it out, and went to get him a glass of tea. When he had drunk it, Safi brought him another glass. He tried the needle again, and the man yelled again. I've got to find the right medicine for things like this, Safi said to himself. He brought a handful of powdered qoqa and a third glass of the tea. Put the powder into your mouth and drink this, he told him. He waited for a quarter of an hour, and the farmer fell back asleep. Then Safi sewed up his leg. Now take him home and put him to bed.

The neighbors said: How much do we owe you?

This was a lot of work, Safi told them. I used a lot of expensive thread and broke four needles on him. So I'll have to charge you twenty rials.

Each neighbor gave a little. They paid Safi and carried the farmer home. When they had gone, Safi went and sat on his sheepskin to enjoy himself. He poured himself a glass of tea and ate a spoonful of qoqa paste as he drank it. He was thinking that now that he was a doctor he must go down to the city and buy medicines. I've got to make a list of what I need. He got up and brought a board to write on and a pen made from a piece of cane.

The first medicine I need is red pepper. And then I need cumin and black pepper. And henna. He went on writing out the names of many other things he wanted to buy. Soon he got onto his horse and started out for the city.

He tethered his horse in the fondouk. Then he went to see a man who had a stall inside the gate. Give me two pesetas worth of red pepper and two of black. And the same of cumin and cinnamon and anise. He paid the man and went on to another stall. Give me two pesetas worth of rasoul and a bottle of orange flower water, and two pesetas worth of chibb. He paid and went out into the street, where a woman sat on the curb. She was holding an open umbrella over her head, and she had many kinds of resins and powders spread out in front of her. He bought a rial's worth of benzoin. And he went to a bacal and bought a pound of honey, and string and needles.

Before leaving the city he collected three big wooden crates, because he wanted to build benches for his patients to lie on. He tied everything onto his horse and set out for the village.

When Safi was back home again he got to work. He built fires in both of his braziers and put a pail of water over each fire. From the other room he brought a collection of bottles of all sizes. While the water heated he pulled the three crates to pieces and took out the nails. When it was boiling, he put anise seed in one pail and cumin in the other, and left them both on the fire to boil. After they had boiled for a long time, he began to fill the bottles. Then he corked them and put them on the shelf. The rest of the things he arranged in tins, and piled them on another shelf. Finally he built the benches out of the crates, and covered them with burlap bags so they would be comfortable to lie on.

One evening when he had taken a great deal of qoqa, he heard a knocking on the door and the sound of a voice calling. He opened the door and saw a man. What is it?

My wife's having a baby and the midwife can't manage it. I'll go and look at her, said Safi. He took a bottle of boiled anise and one of cumin, and followed the man.

They went into the man's house. Give me a glass, said Safi. He mixed the anise and the cumin water and told the man to make his wife drink it.

When she had swallowed the stuff the woman opened her eyes and began to move around in the bed. Safi seized her hips and pushed, and the baby slipped out. The woman took the child in her hands and cut it loose.

Everything will be fine now, said Safi.

How much money is it going to cost?

That's the best medicine I have, Safi told him, and it's made of the most expensive materials. I gave you forty rials' worth of it.

I have a young cow, said the man. I can give her to you if you like.

Fine, said Safi. We'll close the deal tomorrow in front of the cheikh.

The man agreed.

The following morning Safi went out to meet the man with the young cow, and together they went to the cheikh. He took the calf back to his house and tied it up with the other cows, very much pleased because it was worth much more than forty rials.

One day a group of men brought the pacha of a distant city to see Safi. He was a man who was always sick, and wherever he went in his travels he looked for a doctor. When his hosts told him that there was a doctor in the village, straightway he wanted to see him, and they carried him on a litter to the clinic. The pacha was thinking: Maybe at last this one will give me the right medicine.

When they arrived at the clinic Safi was just finishing another large shack he had been building. *Salaamou aleikoum*.

*Aleikoum salaam*. This is the Pacha of Bzou who has come to our town.

I'm very sick, the Pacha said.

Take him inside, Safi told them. How many of you are there?

There are six of us.

I'll have this room finished in ten minutes. You'll be needing it to sleep in, because you'll all have to stay here until he's cured.

They agreed. Safi finished hammering, and put some mats on the floor. Then the pacha and his friends went inside. Safi followed them, and knelt down to prepare tea for his visitors, and he put qoqa into the tea as he worked. And he set out a plate of qoqa mixed with honey for them, so they could eat it along with their tea.

Then they sat back to drink. Safi said to the pacha: Where do you feel sick? I don't know. There's no such disease as what I have.

But try and tell me what it's like, Safi said.

The pacha shut his eyes. When I fall asleep I don't know whether I'm really asleep or not, he said. And when I eat I don't know whether I've eaten or not. And if I go out for a walk I'm not sure whether I'm taking a walk or not. Even if

I sit still, I'm not certain whether I'm really sitting there or not. And right now, am I talking? Or do I just think I'm talking?

Safi jumped up. What luck! he cried. I've got exactly the medicine for that. I've seen many cases of the same thing, and I've cured them all.

You have? The pacha was delighted.

This man is not sick, thought Safi. He's just rich. And he's afraid of dying. That's all.

He took a pail of water and put it on the fire. When the water began to boil, he threw in a lot of red peppers. And he let them boil for many hours, as if they had been cow's flesh. When they were ready, he took a fine cloth and placed it over the top of another pail. The liquid went into the pail and the pieces of red pepper stayed in the cloth. He filled a bottle with the water and picked up a piece of rasoul, the clay that women wash their hair with. Then he walked over to the pacha.

Ya, Sidi Bacha, he said. Here's the medicine. It's not medicine. Take it or don't take it. It will either cure you or it won't.

The pacha looked at Safi. And what does all that nonsense mean?

You tell me you sleep and you don't sleep, and you eat and don't eat, and sit and don't sit. I'm giving you the medicine for all those things. Drink half a glass of this the first thing every morning and eat a piece of this rasoul while you drink it. And do the same thing when you go to bed.

Good.

When evening came, the pacha decided he would begin his treatment. First I'll put the solid stuff into my mouth and then I'll wash it down with the liquid, he thought.

So he put the clay into his mouth and drained the glass of pepper water. As it reached his stomach he felt fire inside him, burning his throat and his heart. And although he had not got up from bed by himself in many months, he sprang up now without any help from anyone and began to walk back and forth very quickly. His face turned the color of fire and he breathed with his mouth opened wide. Soon he went outside and looked at the sky, and suddenly it occurred to him that he was cured. He called to his friends: It's a fine night! Come out and smell the air!

They all went out and raised their heads and sniffed, and told him that it was indeed a beautiful night. When they went back inside, the pacha sat in a corner for three hours talking to himself. After that he fell asleep.

In the morning when he awoke, the pacha decided that he felt so well he would not bother taking any more medicine. He went to speak with Safi. I'm cured, *hamdoul'lah!* My health is perfect. I feel like a man of twenty. How much do I owe you?

Speak with your own image, said Safi. You know what your health is worth to you.

The pacha took out a small pouch full of gold coins and handed it to Safi. And he and his friends went out.

Safi was not satisfied with his clinic, because he still had not discovered a medicine strong enough for serious cases where he had to cut and sew flesh. He worked at this each day, and went on mixing things together and trying them



himself afterward. One day he picked some datura leaves and dried them over the fire. Then he made a powder of them, and pounded kif seeds in a mortar. He mixed these two with powdered qoqa. He added argan oil to some of this, and honey to some more. The powder that was left he stored away in a box.

Let's see what this does, he said to himself. He took a spoonful and drank a glass of tea. Then he leaned back and shut his eyes.

Three different people pounded on his door that afternoon, and Safi went on sleeping. Night came, and a man arrived with his son to have Dr. Safi look at the boy's tooth, but still he did not awaken.

In the morning Safi heard the donkeys braying and the cocks crowing, and he got up and opened the door to look out. What's the matter with them all? he thought. As he stood in the doorway some men walked past. And Safi said to them: Good afternoon.

It's early yet, they said. It's still morning.

It's not Monday?

Not any more. That was yesterday, they said.

Safi went inside. Aha! he thought. I've found what I was looking for.

That evening a neighbor woman sent Safi a big pot of spinach and a cauldron of snails cooked with tarragon, because she knew he liked those dishes. He was very much pleased with what she had sent him, and he sat down to eat his dinner in a good state of mind. But he had scarcely taken a few mouthfuls when someone began to hammer on his door with great force.

Wait! he shouted. Don't break it down! And he jumped up and opened the door. There were two men holding up a woman between them. They dragged her into the clinic.

What's the matter with her? said Safi. Put her there on the bench, poor thing. She's dizzy and she has a fever, they said. And her vomit is bright yellow. Safi put his hand on her forehead, and saw that the woman was very ill. Her eyes and her face were as yellow as egg yolks. He was afraid, because he did not know what to do for her. But he said: This woman has bousfar. We must get rid of all this yellowness. Has she eaten anything?

Not for the last three days, they said.

Snail broth is what she needs, said Safi. He went across to his rooms and brought the water from the snails he had been eating. When he carried it into the clinic he added four spoonfuls of his new powder, and stirred it into the broth.

The woman drank it all, and then Safi gave her a glass of qoqa tea. Ten minutes afterward she was sitting up talking with her husband, and she seemed very lively.

That's wonderful medicine you've got there, the two men told him. We'd like to buy the whole bowl full, if you'll sell it.

Safi looked at the woman's eyes, and was afraid again. But he agreed to sell the men the bowl of powder for sixty rials. They paid him and led the woman away with them.

After they had gone, Safi sat at his table thinking. He thought of his pouch full of gold coins that the Pacha of Bzou had given him, and of all the rest of the money that he had saved. Suddenly he got up and went out to the house of a

neighbor who lived nearby. He sold the man his cows and his donkey, and went back home. There he collected his clothes and medicines, and packed everything onto his horse. He looked up the road and said to himself: This is the right way. Then he got astride his horse and set out along the road, leaving his clinic behind.

About midnight two men came to the door of the clinic and began to pound on it. One carried a club and the other carried an axe, and they were shouting for Doctor Safi. When they broke in the door and searched the place, they did not find him. By then everyone in the village was outside the clinic. The cheikh came running.

The man holding the axe cried: Doctor Safi sold me medicine. When I gave it to my wife she went crazy. Screaming, running, and we couldn't hold her. When she fell down, blood came out of her mouth, and then she was dead. We're looking for him. Where is he?

The cheikh waited a moment before he spoke. Then he said: Your wife is dead. Take her to the cemetery and bury her. Then you can marry a younger one. And here's Doctor Safi's clinic for you to live in. You can have it. The house you're living in now you can sell or rent.

The man looked at the cheikh. Thank you, he said. That's what I'm going to do. You are a very good man.

Everyone went home to bed. Safi was still riding along the road in the dark, happy and with his head full of qoqa.

*Translated from the Mogrebi by Paul Bowles*

## Mohammed Mrabet

### Fish soup

SEAN GULLETTE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY YTO BARRADA



At seventy-five, Mohammed Mrabet prefers to stay home, in his tidy, windowless studio, in his four-story house, in a Tangier neighborhood full of auto body shops, picturesque vacant lots, and graffiti-sparkled alleys. Home with his grandchildren, his drawings and paintings, his tea and pipe and old cassette recorder.

Even today, the Storyteller haunts the town, barely visible yet palpable, like an ocean vapor. Sightings are infrequent. At seventy-five, Mohammed Mrabet prefers to stay home, in his tidy, windowless studio, in his four-story house, in a Tangier neighborhood full of auto body shops, picturesque vacant lots, and graffiti-sparkled alleys. Home with his grandchildren, his drawings and paintings, his tea and pipe and old cassette recorder. The house is on the city's inland side, far from the Atlantic, the Strait, and the Mediterranean, far from the old casbah and the medina, farther still from the foreign cities where Mrabet's name invokes a lost century.

His health is gone, Mrabet says, and one day soon he will die. When he does, in those cities, strangers will pick up and weigh again his dozen books — including *Love with a Few Hairs*, *The Lemon*, *M'hashish* — and countless stories, published in journals like *Antaeus* and *The Transatlantic Review*. And his art — the intricate, layered, kef-infused, often ugly drawings and paintings of humans, animals, snakes, fishes, and ingrown forms which “cannot be called primitive,” according to William S. Burroughs, “for the draftsmanship is quite sophisticated. On one hand, the paintings derive from the classical Arab tradition, as expressed in mosaics; there is also some resemblance to the spirit pictures drawn by Eskimo shamans.”

For now, though, *hamdullah*, he is alive, and from time to time Mrabet appears, cloaked in a djellaba, at Merkala Beach, where the wooden shanty-cafes are almost gone, forced into the sea by the new corniche. Or he alights briefly at a back table at the Café Tingis in the once-storied Petit Socco, former heart of the old Interzone, where nothing was true and everything was permitted, and where today all the old men look like ghosts of that former time, skeletons in suits shiny with age.

Fifty years ago, as a young man in the Petit Socco, Mrabet met the Europeans who would come to haunt him. Burroughs; the painter, writer, and sound artist Brion Gysin; Truman Capote; and Tennessee Williams, the only one for whom Mrabet retains affection. In the photos from that time Mrabet is *quelque chose de magnifique* — sleek dark hair, a boxer's lean body, watchful eyes with the smile of a charmer. The world in these images is one of cultivated leisure, Tangier as an artsy,

literary, and unabashedly gay counter-Riviera; the pictures suggest other, untold stories outside the frame.

The old pictures in which Mrabet looks most at ease are those he shares with his unquietest ghost, the one who will not leave him be. Bowles. Anything but a tourist, Paul Bowles, the ultimate expatriate, left New York on a literary safari and never went back. After four decades abroad, the name “Bowles” (Jane as well as Paul) had become synonymous, in those faraway cities, with Tangier and the whole northern spur of Africa, where Morocco — full of complicated visions, stories like riddles, and hypnotic rhythms — pushes insolently against anxious, Orientalist Europe.

Most days, Mrabet has little good to say about his translator, agent, employer, and (according to Bowles) close friend. The literati who made the pilgrimage to Bowles’s apartment for his afternoon open house described Mrabet as the gatekeeper, who would begin to sharpen a large knife when the visits dragged on, or hand an over-loquacious visitor a spliff so potent they would be struck dumb. Today, what remains of their forty-year relationship is a lingering sense of betrayal. Mrabet’s stories are full of Europeans (or Nazarenes, in Tanjawi parlance — followers of the man from Nazareth) scheming to exploit the locals for their sunripe essence — and getting a harsh comeuppance at the hands of the spiritually superior Muslims and the thousand-and-one saints who protect them. (The casbah cat who stole Capote’s voice comes to mind.)

It may be hokum to call Mrabet the Last of the Beats or the Bard of the Interzone or a late exemplar of the Mediterranean oral tradition, born from Homer’s primeval sea of stories. The man who answers the door on the quiet street is tiny compared to all that, in height and weight and presence, a plainspoken Tanjawi by his manners. But as he sits on the floor in his usual spot, legs stretched out before him, and begins to speak, reaching for tea, for his pipe, for photographs and drawings and objects to illustrate his point, the Storyteller again becomes visible, making windows in the simple room with his words.

**Sean Gullette:** Salaam Alekum, Maalem.

**Mohammed Mrabet:** Bonjour, ça va, labess? Come sit.

**SG:** So tell me, what was Tangier like in the old days? What did it smell like?

**MM:** Tangier smelled like... a soup made of seawater. Fantastic. Something truly... something that doesn’t exist now. Now there are maybe thirty Tangiers, not one. Bigger, lots of work, lots of people, oh, la la. Then, there were not even 100,000 people.

But lots of Europeans. Thousands of Europeans, really, everything: Español, Français, American. Une salade niçoise. And all of those Europeans were here — you know why? To live, like, for free. A big house that costs nothing, 200, 400, pesetas a month. The woman who works in the house, the chauffeur, the gardeners, and there’s money left over. The European has found like a Chupa Chup. A lollipop. [*Laughs*]

**SG:** How did you meet all these Europeans?

**MM:** It was 1950, ’51. I was sitting in a cafe in the Rue d’Espagne, drawing. I would do these drawings and just leave them there. Those days only the Europeans would buy my paintings.

American, French, a few Italians, Dutch, Germans. Not expensive — nothing, 100 dirhams, 50 dirhams.

One day this European came in. He came and took five drawings. And he gave me 100 dollars. I laughed! And one day, after that, I was drawing and this woman, a European, looked over my shoulder. And she said, “*magnifique, fantastique...*”

She said, “What’s your name?”

I said, “Mohammed Mrabet.”

She said, “I’m Jane Bowles. Please come sit with me.”

I said, “Jane, I’m going to finish what I have to do, and I’ll come sit with you.”

That’s how that happened. And I brought over a cup of cafe au lait in my hand, and I was with her. I started to smoke and drink. She said, “Are you married?” and I said, “Yes.”

I said, “Are you?” And she said, “Oh, my husband’s in the Sahara recording music.”

I said, “Oh, that’s good, he’s going to make a lot of money.”

Jane looked at me and laughed and made a face. At that moment I thought, This woman might be... sick. And I said to this woman, “Alright, I am going to tell a story.” And she said, “What? A story? Good.”

And I told a story. She started to laugh. She said, “Really, *magnifique*.” I told another story, and she said, “Ah, *fantastique*.”

Later, I said, “Alright, I’m going to leave you, I’m going home, to sleep. It’s two-thirty in the morning.”

The next Saturday, Jane was there. The same thing: I told two or three stories, she went crazy. Another Saturday she was there, and she said, “This is my husband.” I shook his hand and said, “Hello, hello, *ça va*?” I was laughing. He said, “Why are you laughing?” and I said, “I know you. I’ve seen you on the beach. I was fishing. And you were with many people.” Really, he was always with many people. William Burroughs, Brion Gysin, Ahmed Yacoubi, Tamsamani, Corso, Capote.

He said, “Oh yes, I remember, you had a lot of fish. My wife has told me a lot about you, that you have a lot of stories. It’s fantastic. I can do translation, I can do a book in America, you can get a contract, get money.” [*Laughs*] I looked at him like this. [*Totally blank features*] I believed nothing he said to me.

But Jane hassled me. So I went to visit. “*Ça va, hamdullah, come in, what do you want to drink?*” I said, “Me, I don’t drink alcohol.” Really, I don’t drink alcohol. I went in the kitchen and made myself a coffee. We started talking. Jane said, “So you have a lot of stories?” I said, “Yes, lots of stories and lots of novels, too.” Rewayats. Before television, before radio, men in the cafe would

smoke and drink tea and tell a novel, every day for two or three hours. The rewaya would finish in a week.

**SG:** How did you work, exactly?

**MM:** I went in with Paul, and Paul gave me a big machine, with big tapes and a microphone, and I told twenty-seven stories. And afterward, over at their place, I did the translation with him. He said, "Can you help me?" He said, "I don't understand Darija [Moroccan Arabic]." He understood nothing, less than nothing. Jane, yes, she spoke very well. And I started translating the recordings into Spanish. He told people he did translations directly from Darija. Into English. Not true. Really, not true. I touch the machine like this and the machine says my story in Darija, and I tell him in Spanish.

And he did the translation into English, and he typed them on the machine. All the books, like that. He sold the twenty-seven stories, all of them. In America.

Then I did my book *Love with a Few Hairs*.

I finished, and I told Paul, "I finished the film." He said, "The film?" We Moroccans say rewaya, film, story. Europeans say "novel."

Jane said, "We're going to translate it," and I said, "Alright." We started doing the translation, and he finished this *Love with a Few Hairs*. He called Jane to come down, and he said, "This Mrabet, he's something else, a magnificent thing." And the people in New York said, "Yes, we want to publish this novel."

So I brought him another one. "I've finished another rewaya," I said. He just looked at me, shocked. I said, "The title is *Citron*. The Lemon." And it went like that. [Laughs]

**SG:** Where did you find the ideas?

**MM:** I don't know. I can't say anything. Really. You are in front of me, I look at you, and I could do a story about you — really, a horrible story. Or a *magnifique, fantastique* story. I'm like that. I'm telling the truth — even me, myself, I don't know where all that comes from. And when I start to do a drawing, I don't know what I'm going to do — I start, and at the end there's something there.

**SG:** Where did these stories come from?

**MM:** I have no idea. I could say the fish brings me the stories, the big fish whose life I saved. In the Cave of Hercules.

My wife was sick. Pregnant. One night she said to me, "I want fish. Go fishing." I said to my wife, "It's night, there's rain, the sea is high — five-meter waves! How can I go fishing?"

So I went out at six in the morning, to Hercules Cave, and the water had gone down. I went down to the sea with my tackle, and I started climbing over the rocks by the sea. Down there, when the



water goes down, there's always some water that stays in the holes on top of the rock. So I'm looking for baitfish in the holes.

Then I hear, "Aaaaahhhh!... Ha-uaaaaahhhh!"

I got up on a rock and looked.

And I see this fish. Oh, la la! Like five, six, meters long.

Something *magnifique*. I went over to him, I looked at him, I laughed. I looked up at the sky and said, "Hamdullah," thanks be to God — oh, la la. This fish — maybe 500,000, 600,000 dirhams.

And he answers me. He says, "If you sell me, if you eat me, you're going to lose a lot. Your whole life."

I said, "You talk?"

He said, "Yes. I'm a fish, but I'm very different. I came from far, far away, I don't know how many thousands of kilometers, with my wife and kids. And I find it *magnifique* here. It's peaceful. There's a lot to eat — *magnifique*. And I stayed here with my wife and kids. And now you can help me. Save my life."

And I said, "How can I, you're so big?"

His head was here, his tail here. [*Mrabet's arms spread energetically*] Enormous. He was lying on the rock with his head over the edge. On the tail, there was a big fin. And I pushed it this way, that way. And while I pushed, he moved his head like this. And we pushed. And after a long time, he got his head over the edge and pssssssshhhhhh... He went out into the water."

A few minutes later he came back. With his wife and kids, everyone. One of them said, "Merci beaucoup, Monsieur Mrabet. You saved our father." And the fish said, "I'll come to visit you. Au revoir, au revoir." He left. I started fishing, and I caught a lot of fish that morning. I cleaned them there, prepared them, and I went home.

Truly, that's how it happened. I'm not crazy. I swear by my God that's how it happened.

One day, later, I'm here in my house, in my studio, like this, and someone pushed my shoulder. I look over, it's the fish. And he said, "I am the fish, your friend, whose life you saved, and I bring something good for you."

He told me four stories.

That's how it happens. He comes, he tells stories. He told me lots of stories. His name is Mehend. Ah, Mehend, Mehend... There are three Mehends. There's Mehend who drinks only milk. Mehend who takes the rock and makes rope from the rock. And Mehend who takes a mountain, like this, and then another mountain, and joins them.

And the son of Mehend, he fell out of a tree, a big tree, the little Mehend, and he slid down all the way to the sea. The big fish came out of the sea. And he found his kid lying by the sea. And he began giving of himself, until the little one grew up.

**SG:** Do you ever think your life would be different if you hadn't met Jane and Paul?

**MM:** Why? Why different? I was born writing, I was born painting. I did books before I knew Bowles. Truly. I have a new book coming out. I'm going to do another new one. Truly. Ah, oui. Want to see the contract? Look. It's called *Allah M'ahnik* — "God be with you." They want to change the title to *Manaraf*, which means "I don't know." Good. Let them change it. I think *Allah M'ahnik* is perfect.

I am a man who — always I'm seeking. Always I search. I work here, I do something here. I could never waste my time in the bars, in the discotheques, no, no, no. That means nothing to me. "Come on, let's go eat in the restaurant." That's zero to me. I do my own cooking, with my hands.

When I cooked at Paul's, Jane and Paul said, "You are going to work with us." I did the cooking. Chauffeur. Bodyguard. Eighty-seven kilos. At that time, I was something *magnifique*. And I didn't know fear. Fear for me meant nothing. And I cooked, everything, whatever he wanted, I did it. Everyone happy. The people who came, they eat what I cook, very happy. But Jane is not happy. Always fighting with Paul. She was right. Really, she was right.

**SG:** What about Burroughs?

**MM:** *Monsieur Burroughs...* [*He goes out and returns with a painting by another artist, of Burroughs bleeding, gunshots behind him.*] That's how it went at the end. When he fell down, the blood came out of his mouth. You know something about Burroughs? William Burroughs killed his wife — why?

**SG:** Well — he said, evil spirits.

**MM:** Hmm? Accident? Ha. You know why? And why did he kill his son? Every day, he gave him a big thing of cocaine, horrible. He finished the son off. The son was very sick — the liver. The liver became completely white. That's how he killed his son. After that, he stayed with a pretty kid that he brought from Africa somewhere. He found something good there and brought it back with him. And after what happened? The pretty kid, he stole everything there was. And Burroughs started trembling, his hands shaking like this... I'm not laughing at him. He smokes, he drinks, always he has a bottle right here. And the sniffing, and — ha ha ha — the white flour in the nose. The shots. And lots of aspirin, I saw lots of aspirin, red, green. I don't know. Always nervous.

**SG:** Was he a good man?

**MM:** Not a good man. Not him, not Bowles, not Bryon Gysin. There was one *magnifique*, Tennessee Williams. I knew him here, I knew him in Hollywood. I knew lots of people over there. Even Elia Kazan.

**SG:** What were you doing in the States?

**MM:** Oh, they hassled me. So I went there. And looked at lots of things. Everyone happy with me, a Moroccan who writes. All the Americans wanted something from Mrabet.

**SG:** How can you say Bowles wasn't a good man — after everything you did together?

**MM:** He did lots of harm. A big racist. I can say that. Even if I went to America, I'd say that. He did harm to me.

**SG:** How?

**MM:** I published I don't know how many books there, and I never got the interest. The interest goes directly to Paul. He did a big scandal with the contract. It said Mohammed Mrabet, Paul Bowles. But in the book it says Bowles, then Mrabet.

Then he took my story and made a book. The story of Mrabet with the name of Bowles. Please. You know what he did? People would come to the house. And when they wanted to talk to me, he'd say, "Oh, be careful of Mrabet. Mrabet is very dangerous." Please. When there were women, he'd say, "Be careful of Mrabet." I'm not a dog. I have a lot up here. [*He picks up a stone.*] Me and this piece of rock, it's the same. I have nothing, no school, never did anything. I don't know how to read. But my head has always stayed *magnifique*. I didn't lose my head in the schools.

At the end of the day, after I finished cooking and put everything away, cleaned everything, left the kitchen *comme il faut*, I would go into the living room and say, "See you tomorrow, good night." And I went home. And when I get home, I take off my robe, I put on another robe. And I have a son and a daughter! Ah! And we play... sometimes we sleep like this all together, the boy on this side, the girl on this side. Until the morning, *magnifique*. Two little kids. The best thing in the life of a man. Nine kids that are mine; four of them lived. All of them are married now. This one is married now, with a Spanish woman. They have a kid who is just — *magnifique*.

That is life. You're born, you grow up, you make your kid, you're dead. Adieu. Ça y est. Finished. That's it. That's life.

Like the birds, now, this time of year. This month, the birds come here to Tangier, they cross the sea, there are two, three thousand birds, over the sea. You've never seen that? I have. The bird, he travels. From the Sahara he comes here. From Spain he comes here. And when summer is over, he goes back. Always he's looking for a place where there's sun. Like us. The bird comes here and lays his eggs, they hatch, and adieu.



Me, now it's over. Finished.

**SG:** How do you spend your days?

**MM:** I sit here. I take the machine, I push the button, and start talking. [*Laughs*] And I talk, I talk. Then I stop. I sit a little. Then bam: I talk. Then I stop, and I start painting. Then I put down the painting and take this recorder. That's my life.

And after, I go out. I buy some potatoes, this and that. The fish, I go down to the town, I have fisherman friends who bring me live fish. And I prepare it, tajine or in the oven. I do a lot in the kitchen. A lot of the time, I make fish soup.

**SG:** We all eat soup in Tangier. What's your

recipe?

**MM:** Well, I go to the sea. And I catch little fish, lots of them. And I bring them and I have a bag, I put all the fish in the bag and close it. There's a big pot full of water and maybe some vegetables. And boil-boil-boil-boil!

And after, I press the bag, and all the liquid falls back in the pot. And what's left in the bag — garbage. After that, if you want vegetables, do that, or you can do pasta. Oh, la la, that's good.

Fish is the best thing. Sometimes if I take a big fish like that, like a loup de mer or a pargo, something big, I clean it real good, I put two kilos of salt on him and — in the oven.

**SG:** Those fish don't tell stories?

**MM:** No, no, no. I eat the fish who doesn't speak. I don't eat the talking fish. The talking fish is very dangerous.

Every week, three, four, days he comes. A great friend. I listen to everything he says. And everything he says. Super. You know, saving someone's life, you know what that means? A lot. I've saved a lot of lives, in the sea. Truly.

At that time, I made a living from the sea. Fishing. And every day I caught two big buckets full of fish and sold them. And always there was lots of fish at my house, fresh, living. Now I don't eat much meat, sometimes I eat some chicken, but not *electrique* chicken. The real chicken, I kill with my hands, I prepare with my hands, I clean it very well. I cook him in water, take off the water, he dries off, then in the oven. And in the water that came off the chicken, I cut up the vegetables, and there's a soup.

**SG:** What will Tangier be like in the future?

**MM:** I will be dead. I don't know. I can't say anything. I can't invent something I know nothing about. Maybe *magnifique*. Maybe horrible. Maybe bessara, split pea soup. I can't say anything. Tangier has changed. Not 100 percent — 10,000 percent. When I leave my house, I think I am a tourist. My friends, none of them exist now. No cafe, no restaurant. I go out if I have to buy something or I have a meeting with someone. I'm here, working. And when I get tired I go out, and I walk a few kilometers and come home. That's it.

**SG:** Are you happy with your life?

**MM:** I'm very happy, hamdullah and shukalillah. A man's life, he could live until sixty, sixty-one, years old. That's the end. God gave me ten years more. A great gift, hamdullah.

**SG:** Thank you.

**MM:** Thank you — just “thank you,” and that's all?

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*I expected this and end up paying Mrabet rather too much for a photograph in a broken gold frame. It's him, around twenty-five, sitting in the driver's seat of somebody's car, with a dark European-style winter overcoat on. Very cleanly shaven with sideburns, looking a bit like a young Johnny Cash, eyes down, not at the camera, at something in his hands, tired and a little worried. Gray light outside, rain on his lapel and in his hair. A winter day in Tangier in the late 50s.*