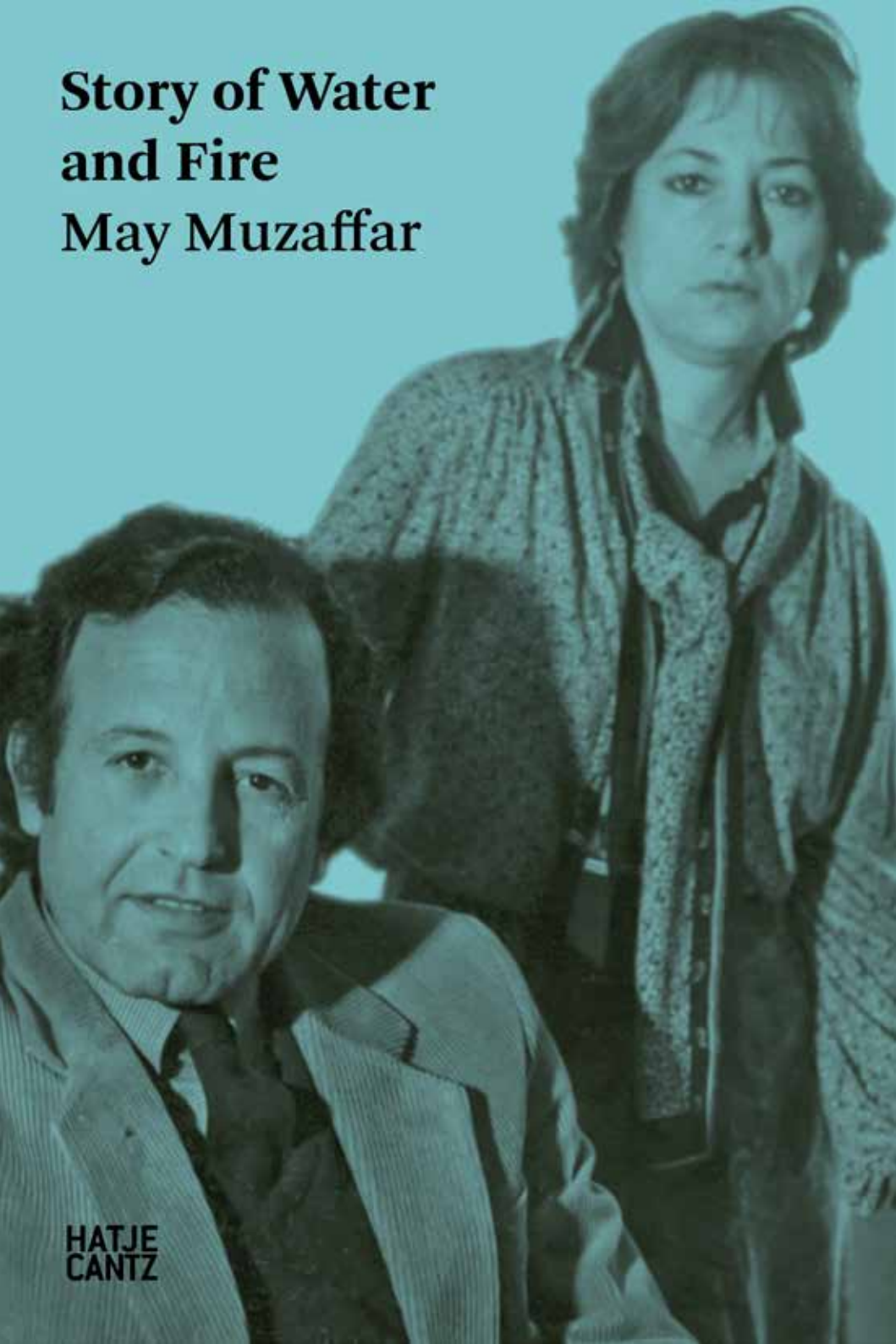


**Story of Water
and Fire**
May Muzaffar



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Story of Water and Fire



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Foreword

It is our pleasure to introduce May Muzaffar's book, *Story of Water and Fire*, which provides a captivating insight into the lives of two prominent figures in the Iraqi art world. May Muzaffar and her late husband Rafa Nasiri were pioneers in their respective fields of poetry and painting and print making, and their story is a testament to their passion for art and dedication to their craft.

The book takes the reader on a journey through the couple's life before and after they met each other, providing vivid descriptions of the art scene in Baghdad from the 1960s until the early 1990s, as well as their travels during these and later periods. The book also details their years of exile from 1991, when they resided in Jordan and Bahrain. This rare glimpse into the personal lives of these two great artists offers a rare glimpse into their position and relations with both the Arab and international art scenes.

This book serves not only as a tribute to the remarkable careers of May Muzaffar and Rafa Nasiri, but also sheds light on the rich artistic heritage of Iraq and the broader Arab world. We hope that their story will inspire future generations of artists and art enthusiasts to continue pushing the boundaries of creativity and artistic expression. The book includes photographs of the art scene in Baghdad, adding a visual representation of the couple's legacy.

In addition to being a compelling portrait of two influential Iraqi artists, May Muzaffar's book serves as an invaluable guide to the archival materials that al Mawrid Arab Center for the Study of Art at New York University Abu Dhabi has digitized and will make available to researchers.

Al Mawrid is dedicated to the study and the preservation of Arab art and culture, it is uniquely positioned to serve as a bridge between past and present. Through its research, pedagogy, and archival work, al Mawrid plays a vital role in documenting the rich artistic heritage of the Arab world, promoting contemporary scholarly work on Arab artists, and fostering cross-cultural dialogue.

We express our gratitude to May Muzaffar for her invaluable cooperation in writing this book. Her first-hand accounts and personal insights have enriched our understanding of Iraqi art and culture. We also extend our appreciation to Maher Kayyali from the Arab Institute for Publishing and Research, publisher of the Arabic edition from which this book was translated.

Salwa Mikdadi

Director, al Mawrid Arab Center for the Study of Art
New York University Abu Dhabi

Preface

Rafa's departure from this world left a tremendous gap, and nothing, nor anyone, could have pulled me from its depths. Nothing, that is, but preserving his presence by my side. When friends and family took their leave late that first night after his funeral, I closed the door behind them and withdrew alone with my new reality. Loneliness enveloped me like the walls of a deep, dark well as I faced a looming question: How could I continue our journey alone, and assume the duty of preserving his legacy, his name, his great contribution to art? I'd long aspired to work on a project documenting our shared life, one that was filled with love, harmony, and unity rarely found in cultural circles. I once shared this idea with him and it pleased him; he said he wished that I would. Now, I found, the time had come to carry it out, for this is what would keep us together.

Rafa was passionate about documenting his artistic practice and maintaining his work from all its stages, beginning with his studies at the Institute of Fine Arts and through to the final year of his life. He produced remarkable photographic documentation of everywhere he went, and kept notebooks of various sizes in which he recorded his thoughts, poetic literary texts, and visual ideas. His need to write, and to create an outlet for his feelings, increased after we left Baghdad.

Rafa kept his correspondence with his father and siblings from his four years of academic studies in Beijing, China, as well as other letters from friends. In his final years, he revisited his past and shared memories of it whenever he had the opportunity to meet or speak with his siblings. He even made a voice recording with his mother, who spoke of his springtime birth and his tenderest years. Rafa often spoke of his childhood, of playing in the open spaces of Tikrit and summers spent on the riverbanks, all of which he documented in his delightful autobiography *Rihlati ila al-sin* (My journey to China, 2012). Relying on his active memory, he wrote of his upbringing, his life's path and artistic journey, and his family's move to Baghdad. He later added additional thoughts and memories, which I published in his final and posthumous book, *Fifty Years Between the East and West* (2019). As such, I chose not to include a chapter on Rafa's childhood and early life in this book. I did, however, dedicate a chapter to myself, to shed light on aspects of my life and youth that even those close to me do not know.

With the exception of the first and second chapters, I relied foremost on my memory in the writing of this book. I'm blessed with a highly present and detailed memory, even of my early childhood.

Yet, for the first and second chapters I relied on diaries in which I'd recorded details of my every meeting with Rafa, from the time we met and throughout the two years before we married.

Completion of this memoir took about six years, from 2014 to 2020, during which I was forced to take occasional breaks to focus on other tasks and responsibilities. Numerous reviews of each chapter also delayed its completion, and I still do not feel that I am finished. Throughout this difficult journey I conversed and consulted with two close friends, journalist and publisher Amel al-Sharqi, and writer and translator Bahira Abdul Latif, each of whom carefully and lovingly read my words. They both know me and Rafa well, and for each of them I am grateful.

The Arabic edition of the book was designed by my dear nephew, Mohammed Namir, with the completion and final touches to take it to press coming from artist Ala Younis. Thank you to photographer Haitham Aziza for assisting me in enhancing the quality of the selected photographs.

For this English edition of the book, I am deeply grateful to al Mawrid for their translation of the book into English and for including it in their digital archive, thus ensuring its accessibility to a wider audience. I am also indebted to Salwa Mikdadi for her initiative to translate the book, and to Ala Younis for her editorial effort and management of the publication process. The generous support of New York University Abu Dhabi is also gratefully acknowledged. Finally, I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to Jennifer Peterson for her excellent translation of the book, and to my dear friends and family who have stood by me throughout this journey. Together, we have ensured that Rafa's legacy and contribution to art will be remembered and celebrated for generations to come.

May Muzaffar
Amman, Jordan
March 2023

Introduction

We were having breakfast on a biting cold winter's day, Rafa sitting in his place facing the wide window overlooking the valley, gazing out into the open space, when he said, "Look at the sky. . . . What pure blue it is!"

Thus, he began his morning, leaving me unable to look at the sky without seeing his face in it.

A letter to Rafa:

In order to fill the dreadful emptiness created by your absence, and so as to be with you, in your company, I'm going to start writing the story of our life together over forty years. I told you one day, when you'd regained some energy, of my intention to write such a book. Your handsome face lit up as you softly said, "I wish you would."

Starting today, I'll record every thought and scene passing before me from the store of memories I have of the years we lived together.

I'll continue speaking to you, and with you, so that you remain present with me, my love and companion. I'll follow the footsteps of that rebellious young man we met in the Paris home of Etel Adnan and Simone Fattal during the summer of 1979. Do you remember?

At the time, we'd just completed our stay at the Moussem culturel d'Asilah in Morocco.¹ For about a month, we'd attended its second season, made rich by the attendance of cultural actors and artists, both Arab and not. We'd attended enchanting plays and concerts, and a poetry reading by Adonis and Mahmoud Darwish. Mornings had been allocated for seminars open to the public, while the evenings were filled with cultural activities, meetings, and convivial gatherings held in the open air amid stunning land- and seascapes. You were pleased you'd begun working in the graphic art studio that you'd set up with your friend Mohammad Omar Khalil, and you'd produced a captivating collection of prints. A highlight for you had been meeting your Portuguese colleague David de Almeida, of whom you'd often spoken. During that season, we met many people, including Tayeb Salih, who was a regular guest at the festival. We grew close to some, including Charbel Dagher and Pierre Abi Saab.

We'd planned to go from Morocco to France and roam its southern coasts. Etel Adnan and Simone Fattal were among the festival participants that year, and we'd previously met them at the

1974 Al Wasiti-Fine Arts Festival in Baghdad. We told them of our intention to head to Paris, and they offered for us to stay in an apartment attached to their Parisian home.

We traveled by plane from Tangier to Nice and rented the Renault 5 we so loved. We bought a map and decided to take the rural roads. My job was to follow the map, but I'm not good at reading one; in my childhood I struggled to draw the map of Iraq. And so we got lost—you'd refuse to seek the help of anyone to guide us, and I was a bad guide. You'd get irritated and upset as you circled through farmland and forests. We'd stumble across a lovely hotel and spend the night, and then resume our way in the morning.

Our trip took ten days, during which we visited the most beautiful of the coastal cities and enjoyed their gorgeous beaches, stopping at Monte Carlo, Saint-Tropez, Juan-les-Pins, and Antibes, where Pablo Picasso had lived and produced his gorgeous ceramics kept in the Musée Picasso. We avoided the main highways and penetrated deep into the green environs, intoxicated by the scent of the land and greenery. But with continually getting lost, we eventually had to resort to the highway to follow its clear signs. We visited Aix-en-Provence and were lucky to attend a Kandinsky exhibition at Château des Baux de Provence, spectacularly situated on a mountaintop. From a distance one can see Mont Sainte-Victoire, which Paul Cézanne had prolifically painted. When we reached Avignon, we found it filled with tourists attending its famed theater season, and unfortunately it wasn't possible to stay over as no accommodation was available, not even for just one night.

Finally, we reached Paris, stopping at the first rental office to hand in the car, and there I contacted Simone. Breathlessly she asked, "Where are you, we were worried about you! Etel woke up this morning crying because she dreamed that you wouldn't be coming to Paris!" Oh, Etel and her tender heart!

We headed to their address in Saint-Germain, 27 rue Jacob, and entered a large courtyard shaded by a linden tree, with which Etel conversed and to which she dedicated a splendid volume of poetry. There we met the handsome and rebellious young Frenchman whom Etel had met by chance and taken pity upon. He rejected any kind of constraint, including formal education, and had left his parents' home to live alone in a small abode allocated by the state for the homeless. His voraciousness for independently selected reading, and his revolutionary ideas, meant he could not commit to

any methodology other than that which he chose for himself. He was nineteen years old and possessed knowledge comparable to that of leading intellectuals, knowledge that qualified him to engage with philosophy, poetry, music, and the arts. Yet, he was rigid in his chaotic and extremist opinions on life and art, and often angered Etel with the anger of a mother fearing the ruin of her son. He lived on meager assistance from the state that was insufficient to cover his basic needs, including his bills for electricity, which got cut off. And so Etel provided him with food and a comfortable place to read after the public libraries closed their doors.

After we'd settled into their pretty upstairs apartment, we sat to rest and drink tea, and were joined by this young man. Whenever we'd succeeded with a segment of conversation—which took place in English, Etel helping him to grasp whatever was difficult for him to understand—he'd slip away to stand at the window, pulling from his attire a thick notebook in which he'd scribble something, and then return to us. Etel told us that he wrote anything and everything he encountered or that crossed his mind, and had done so since he was six years old. He recorded all his thoughts and everything he witnessed.

Today, I find myself recalling the image of that young man so fully immersed in himself, his thoughts, and his engagement with the world.

I see him as a model to follow so I can be fully engaged with you.

May
Amman, Jordan
December 22, 2013

¹ It was our second visit to the coastal city of Asilah, Morocco, and I will speak more of it in the chapter on our trips.

The Beginning

Our friendship was born in autumn, and autumn remained the season dearest to our hearts.

A letter to Rafa:

A year ago today, you were sitting on the sofa opposite my desk in our new studio in Lweibdeh [Amman, Jordan]. Soft sunlight bathed your face, and your eyes had surrendered to its magic as you listened to Bach cello suites. Perhaps you were immersed in a close, yet unattainable, dream.

“When will I go back to painting?” you asked. “Will this weakness continue to drain me of my energy?” You said this although—and despite the frailty that had rapidly undermined your previous vigor—you’d recently accomplished your purest work yet in terms of brevity, clarity, and transparency: *Beside the River*. It was your latest attempt to locate an alternative homeland.

Alone, I am today in a world desolate but for your spirit shadowing me, lingering with me wherever I am. I subsist on memory that returns you to me, and see you sitting nearby, each of us listening to the sounds within us. My conversation with you will not end, and your image will not disappear. I’ll bring our story back, here, on these pages, just as I promised you.

Over forty years ago, during one of my visits to the home of our friend the writer Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, I was halted near the entrance by the sight of a translucent painting in white and blue bearing no signature by the artist. It enchanted me as much as it confounded me: Was it a wave in a turquoise sea, or the body of a woman in a state of passion? I asked Jabra whose work this was, and he replied in surprise, “Rafa Nasiri, how can you not know him?”

I conjure you up and see that handsome young man sneaking glances at me from between paintings hung in the National Museum of Modern Art (Gulbenkian) in early 1971. I still hadn’t met you. I wondered that day who was pursuing me with those stolen glances, and why he didn’t speak to me directly. Then I learned from Dia [al-Azzawi] that you were the artist whose paintings had enchanted me, an artist who’d dared in that exhibition to turn square frames into rhombuses, and painted clear swathes of color, sometimes horizontally and sometimes vertically, separated by lines of gold. That young man was Rafa!

Amman, Jordan

March 23, 2014

The first exhibition of the New Vision group in March 1971, the vanguard of Iraq's modern art movement, provided my entrance into writing on visual arts. I attended with the aim of viewing its works and meeting Dia al-Azzawi, to interview him for the journal *Mawaqif* (Positions) at the request of [poet] Adonis. I approached him with a carefully reverential demeanor, for it was not easy for a beginner in the arts like me to hold a competent conversation, for a well-established journal, with an artist whose name was dazzling Baghdad and Beirut at the time. Yet, my careful reverence dissipated, or nearly so, before the friendly welcome al-Azzawi gave me. Dia was extremely close to the literary scene, and always sought to create lively interaction between artists and writers, building support for the visual arts movement through serious writing based on knowledge that went beyond the style commonly used in journalism at the time. I didn't know Dia personally, but I'd seen him when we were students at the College of Arts [in Baghdad], and I knew him to be among those who worked during their free time in the college's open studio run by the artist Hafidh al-Droubi. Dia asked me to first view the exhibition's works, and then set another appointment for the interview.

As I summon the image of Rafa, I see him beside me now with his glowing, childish face and hesitant smile, while underlying it was worry and a curiosity as to what I was thinking as I stood before his work. As for me, I was drowning in confusion, seeking someone to guide me in this world that seemed impenetrable and bewildering at the time. Over the years, I grew to understand that this worry clung to Rafa at all of his exhibitions, even to his last exhibition in Manama, Bahrain, in February 2013. This worry churned beneath a tense silence only broken after the exhibition's opening, when he'd leave with his own personal convictions. He'd take a deep breath and let out the ringing laugh so unique to him, as he announced the start to a celebration of victory. Yet, these worried, curious looks of his were how we first became acquainted.

My relationship with artists developed after that meeting, for we met at the Society of Iraqi Artists in al-Mansour where I attended various cultural activities. Dia and Rafa were members of the board, from 1971-73, headed by sculptor Ismail Fattah. At the time, the society had a program of cultural activities and was a meeting place for the New Vision group, which included Dia al-Azzawi, Saleh al-Jumaie, Hashim Samarji, Ismail Fattah, Tariq Ibrahim, and Mekki Hussein. I'd receive invitations to attend its events, for they came to me at the company I worked in since the autumn of 1970 [the Iraq Reinsurance



Top: New Vision group:
Saleh Al Jumai'e,
Dia al-Azzawi, Hashim
Samarchi, Rafa Nasiri

Bottom: Ibrahim Zayer,
Yousef as-Sayegh, Sadeq
as-Sayegh, Dia al-Azzawi,
Rafa Nasiri, 1970

Company] via the information desk, and I was taken by the beauty of their modern designs. After we met, Rafa would come to my office to deliver invitations in person, either with Dia or on his own.

Sometimes Rafa would linger, but he didn't speak much, and I'd get flustered as I tried to fill the gap left by his silence. He avoided looking me in the eye. Once, he didn't appear at all for a while, and then returned with a new invitation, saying he'd been on a trip to Ljubljana to take part in the Biennial of Graphic Arts. He said it as if I were knowledgeable of such artistic gatherings, though I'd never heard of the city nor knew what graphic arts were. I was somewhat embarrassed and didn't know how to continue the conversation, although I wanted to know more. Nor did he linger, excusing himself and saying that he'd be expecting me at the exhibition.

My office was on the ninth floor of a modern building in which Rafa and Dia had previously been commissioned to create two murals symbolically representing safety and security on the eighth and ninth floors. Dia had worked in his studio, while Rafa had had to work on location in the evenings due to the mural's large size. He'd treated the concept in his abstract style, pure colors, and wavy lines. The elevator hadn't been ready to use at that time, and for months we climbed the stairs to the ninth floor. Every day I would follow the mural's developments without ever meeting the artist. One day, my mentor Najib al-Mani', who was assistant director of the company, spoke to me of Rafa's brilliance and the steadiness of his hand in controlling large swathes of space. He had seen him at work.

Rafa continued to diligently bring me invitations. He'd come to the office and sit with me for a while, drinking his coffee, his eyes always wandering to the large window overlooking al-Jumhuriya Street behind my desk, with the minaret of al-Ghazel Market in the distance, across from the Latin Cathedral. As he was prepared to leave from one of his visits, he said to me, "It doesn't befit you to sit at a steel desk. They should make a diaphanous desk for you."

I shared the spacious office with my friend Anan Sami Fattah. We'd become colleagues after I'd recommended her as manager of the general director's office. She didn't have any prior experience, and so I helped her at first, and she became brilliant and meticulous in her work. Later, a presidential decree prohibited female employees from working in offices adjacent to those of department heads.

Anan was a cheerful person, and I'd had a relationship with her and her sister Siham since our childhood, thanks to our mothers' friendship. She had a strong influence on my personal and social life with



Top: May's office at the Iraqi Reinsurance Company, Baghdad, 1968

Bottom: Lunch at Rafa's family house with Dr. Ferdous al-Abbasi and Dia al-Azzawi, 1971

her open-mindedness, vivaciousness, beauty, style, and good humor. She was also in dire need of a friend to confide in about all that she bore within, and to speak of her wishes for a future beyond the disappointments she had suffered. We had an exceptional friendship that lasted until the unfortunate end of her life due to cancer—a friendship that remained strong, our conversations never losing their effusiveness.

She liked Rafa from the very beginning, and he too felt comfortable with her. She grew increasingly impressed with his likeable nature and found him suitable for me when she innately realized he was infatuated with me. After hearing Rafa's comments to me, she said, "I've never heard of such flirtation!"

I said, "The words of an artist and poet," and she replied laughingly, "Whoever climbs nine flights of stairs to deliver an invitation that could have been left at reception is not just using language. Open your eyes!"

Baghdad, Autumn 1971

We met one evening at the Society of Iraqi Artists, at one of the gatherings we were accustomed to attending. The society formed an ideal cultural space and had become a meeting place for writers, artists, architects, and musicians. I felt a strong need to belong to cultural circles, and was comfortable with this group, having seen the sophisticated behavior of its members that allowed to me move freely among them, something difficult to find in the literary scene at the time. They seemed to accept and welcome women in their gatherings. Dia al-Azzawi spearheaded the group, and was the connecting point between writers and artists, active with a zealous energy and vitality that he maintains until today. I could tell Rafa was the closest to him, and that they shared ideas and ambitions despite the differences in their personalities.

That evening we were in a large group. I noticed Rafa looking at me from afar, and then he changed his place to sit beside me. Friends were speaking of general topics, interspersed with laughter and mockery of just about everything, whereas Rafa remained silent, hardly participating at all. He leaned toward me and whispered, "I'm bored with this gathering. Can we go somewhere else where we can speak at our ease?" I agreed without hesitation, for I harbored a desire to get to know him.

I sat beside him in his old Opel and didn't ask where we'd go. I knew there were few places I could go in the company of a young man, for Baghdad was not as liberal as Beirut. He complained he'd been irritated by the gathering and its repetitive talk, as though he needed to justify his invitation to leave. I paid no mind, for so much in our encounter exuded a sense of comfort—the calm atmosphere, his handsome face, his polite behavior. I felt at ease, as though I'd known him for years. This was my first bold departure from my usual cautiousness in Baghdad.

I could tell he was accustomed to speaking with women in a relaxed manner. And I knew a little about him: his blue painting with its enchanting connotations, my entrance to his beautiful world of art that had so confounded me; and that he was spoken of in Beirut two years earlier, as well as what I'd heard that summer about his astonishing exhibition and his escapades in the city of beauty and freedom. It had shocked me when I discovered that the young man sneaking looks at me between paintings, pursuing me as I turned away, was that very same daring young lover.

We stopped at an outdoor restaurant in east Baghdad that I didn't know. Men and a few women were seated around its tables, and in the center was a dance floor with live music by a group of young men singing English and Italian songs popular at the time, including "Strangers in the Night." We sat in a quiet corner, where we quickly exchanged a few words about the place and then fell silent. Rafa was mirthful, but equally flustered. He asked if I'd mind if he ordered a glass of beer, and I didn't, as I was accustomed to social clubs where alcohol was served. I asked for a juice, and we conversed on general topics before he asked me to dance, which I politely declined.

I noticed his discomfort and the shaking of his hand as he held his glass. He thanked me for accepting his invitation to join him, as he felt a need to speak privately. Then he exploded, expressing his dissatisfaction with Baghdad, its stifling atmosphere, and its restrictive life. He spoke of his desire to be freed of this world, and to find avenues allowing one to be true to oneself. I understood how he felt, given how my brother had suffered upon returning from eight years of study in London. Rafa had spent four years in China, and had recently returned from Portugal, where he'd spent two years training in graphic arts and printmaking. He'd visited several European cities and spent months in Beirut. He said he wanted to leave Iraq and was thinking of completing his studies in America.

I was a good listener; I understood his distress and his pressing desire to flee. Then he told me something more like a confession: “I’m a failure of a lover living his crisis. I say a failure because I know no better description.” Surprised, I asked, “You? But that’s different from what I’ve heard. It’s said that you’re an unrivaled lover.” He was stunned by this and laughed in cheerful embarrassment, as he’d now found the way paved for conversation. Yet, he remained self-conscious and didn’t ask me what I’d heard, or how.

In the summer of 1969, I’d gone with my mother to Beirut as always. We stayed in a hotel in Raouché and got in touch with our friends. We often sat in the Dolce Vita Café, which was beside our hotel and the most beautiful of the cafés overlooking Raouché. I’d met a number of Lebanese writers, and by good coincidence the poet Lami’a Abbas Emara was there with her son, staying in the al-Manara Hotel in Ras Beirut, where Rafa also resided. She’d come visit us with the writer Daisy al-Amir and the poet Habib Sadiq, and occasionally the poet Khalil Hawi. I’d met them at the Arab Poetry Festival and the Arab Literary Convention held in Baghdad that year. When we were alone, she’d speak of Rafa’s artistic news and personal adventures, conveying them lightheartedly with a mixture of wit, admiration, and a sense of pride in him. I hadn’t met Rafa, because his exhibition had ended before we arrived. That summer I also saw Adonis, who’d also attended the poetry festival, and through him I met Samir Sayegh, Munir Akash, and Riyadh Fakhouri, and my relationship with them grew closer during subsequent visits to Beirut.

And, thus, I found the door to conversation flung wide open, for Rafa had a close relationship with the poets and artists of Beirut. We spoke in a continuous flow, Rafa gradually losing his reserve. His tense hands relaxed and his discontent dissipated. The sense of absolute comfort and ease between us inspired within me a sense of delight with the atmosphere and the gentle October breeze. It was a clear and moonless night filled with intimate, effusive conversation, and I listened to Rafa with interest and pleasure. I wasn’t swept away by his tide but remained steadily on the shore, observing the flow. For the first time, I realized how one could be both within a moment and apart from it. It was one of the few instances in which I’d felt satisfied with myself and confident about what I wanted.

We sat across from each other. At one point he drew close and whispered with glistening eyes, “You’re different; you’re splendid.” I smiled and was overcome with a sense of responsibility toward him, a feeling for which I couldn’t place a source. I liked the idea of being

his close friend. He continued to complain of his work and home environments, of troublesome relations and the scarcity of places to go. I, too, felt some of what bothered him, especially the feeling of failure. And I also felt oppressed by the restrictions of Baghdadi society and my familial obligations.

He spoke to me of the last thing he'd painted: death embodied in blue. I don't know why I didn't take him seriously. It seemed like the words came from his mouth, not from the blazing depths of his being. Death! What death could lurk in that raging vitality? I was facing a small genie who'd broken his bottle and taken off. He was troubled, filled with discontent of known causes, and a restlessness needing a woman's company. I was a safe shore for him that night, and he confided freely.

This man so often silent around me, only rarely speaking, was now conversing without restraint. He was a spirit rebelling against everything constraining him, including feelings he saw as a tie to others, no matter who. In the dim light his eyes seemed to shine with vigor and conviction. As I listened, I compared him to everyone I'd known and perhaps admired, and no one was equal to this shimmering soul. I wanted to hear everything and anything. I felt the life pulsing through my veins, a sense of satisfaction filling me; I was utterly at peace and felt I was who I'd always wanted to be. "You're different." I'd been told that on numerous occasions, but it had a different ring under that night's sky.

We stood briefly at the door to my house. He seemed happy and at ease, with just a tad of the discomfort that never left him. With a nervous hand he grasped mine and kissed it with gratitude and decorum. I wasn't sure of my feelings toward him at the time, but I was certain that he'd left with me a part of himself.

When I woke up the next morning, the previous night's meeting felt like a fresh breeze, a splendid and spontaneous encounter in which I'd gained an incomparable friend. Perhaps it was a passing fantasy not to be repeated.

The On-and-Off Stage

I don't know how to describe this period that lasted about two years. It was filled with the sweet and the bitter, with hope and a sense of threat, with connection and separation. Rafa was neither an ideal I aspired to, nor the person I dreamed of, but the light that he sparked within me melted away all other images and conceptions, stripping me of any desire to withdraw. Rafa kept making me feel like our relationship was temporary, always remaining uncertain and hesitant. He clung only to his freedom and was preoccupied only with fleeing to the far reaches of the earth that allowed him to create art as he aspired. Something prevented him from living in harmony with Baghdad and its restrictions. And, despite this, I found myself utterly swept away with love for him.

After that special first evening we spent together alone, he told me he'd be away from Baghdad for a few days on a short trip. Yet, he surprised me the next day by opening the door to my office and standing before me, his eyes drifting to the open space beyond the window. I was delighted by his unexpected appearance. Without my asking, he explained, "I cut my trip short because I forgot some papers."

Then he added, "And I also returned for another reason," and fell silent. I didn't ask him what it was. Silence ensued, and then he hesitantly asked if I could visit his studio to see his latest work. His request was quite a surprise, if I don't say odd, for I knew his studio was in his family home. "One day," I replied, "why not?"

Many days passed before I heard from him again and he asked to meet. When we did, I found myself facing a different person. He was provocative, tumultuous, and aggressive. I felt as though I were being tested, that there was something contrived about his behavior. I kept calm and ridiculed his trifling talk.

We continued to meet, both in groups and alone. Baghdad's many cultural events also brought us together, and we spent much time conversing on the phone. Whenever he'd draw close to me, he'd then distance himself, and his behavior perplexed me. His calls would start off cold and indifferent, which I'd ignore and go on talking, and then he'd take off in lively enthusiasm. I never understood his hearty laughter, and as for his contradictory statements, they could raise to me to a peak and then crash me to the deepest depths. We had long conversations in which I purposely focused on his work and projects, what each of us were reading, and what we were doing. As we listened to each other, we happily discovered the points where our taste converged on the smaller details of life. I grew certain of his uniqueness among everyone I'd ever known.

I wanted to hear more from him and discover who he was, and the telephone was the best way to pull him into speaking. Through our conversations I learned that he suffered from states that worried and confused me: discontentedness, hesitancy, and an indifference toward everything. Nothing was clear to me in the beginning.

Once he spoke to me of a blue painting crossed with a line of red. Then he complained of his excessive use of blue. "Using it again means it's turned into a phenomenon, and I have to figure out the reason for it."

"What does the color mean to you?" I asked.

He replied that he didn't believe in naming colors. "Blue implies sorrow, or failure."

I reminded him of the diaphanous blue pulsing with life in the painting hung at the entrance to Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's home, without mention of its sexual innuendos. He was delighted by the praise and laughed softly. Somewhat provocatively, I asked, "Is it comparable to Picasso's blue phase?"

"No," he said, "the journey remains a long one."

That evening I wrote a poem, "Drawing Lines in Blue and Red," in which I envisioned red sweeping away the blue.

A few days later, he called and inundated me with loving words. With childish joy he proclaimed, "The rule's been reversed! I've been freed of blue, and my painting has turned red! Red has triumphed. And I want to see you."

"When?" I asked softly.

"Now, at this very moment."

"But it's very late. We can speak for a while, but . . ."

"No, no. I want this now." He let out his mighty laugh and I got flustered. I had to control myself before I could control him without dampening his enthusiasm. "Do you really see it as appropriate for me to go out with you at such a late hour?"

"Of course."

"Can you convince my family?"

After a moment of silence, he whispered, "No, most certainly not."

We ended the call. I was unsettled; half of me was overflowing with joy and longing, and the other half was asking where I was going with this man who was wild to the core. "Whims, whims, whims, I'm all whims," he'd said. "I eat when I want, sleep when I want. I leave the house and don't know when I'll return . . . I hate restrictions of all kinds . . . I was created to live without them."

How could I keep up with this flow when I was a person who made a thousand considerations for every step I took? I'd always sought a tender heart to reassure me, not to daunt me. Yet how could I resist the charm of this sweeping tide?

We chose a small table in a quiet and cozy corner of a Karrada café, far from prying eyes. He asked me what I feared.

I looked into his eyes. They were sharp, showing no tenderness. Rather than expressing fear of my fate with him, and his mood swings that bewildered me, I expressed fear of the misunderstanding that often dominates human relationships, the eternal conundrum of people misunderstanding each other. Perhaps what I said was a bit strange to him, and more like a philosophical dilemma.

"Wonderful, that will lead you to utmost confidence! But if you want to understand me, you'll have to enter the world of madness."

I don't know why I didn't take these words seriously: "enter the world of madness." It was most likely contrived, a flexing of muscles and a performative call by the likes of those holding that all poets should resemble Rimbaud or Dylan Thomas, that all artists were bohemians freely roaming the earth without inhibition. I'd always made fun of Dylan Thomas's often-quoted reply to a girl who'd asked him, "How can I become a poet?" He told her to be a prostitute.

What I found loveliest in Rafa was a sincerity he could not hide; it was his most splendid characteristic. Yet, at that time, I still hadn't been able to determine where I stood with him: I had no doubt fallen for the artist, and now was falling for the person, but I hadn't made a decision. I found him churning within my depths like a storm moves through a deep valley, tearing everything from its place. He changed so much within me as I followed his lead. In our conversations, we often reached the pinnacle of understanding as we discovered the points of strength and weakness within us.

"You wouldn't be doing what you are now without me, if it weren't for my invitation and my instigation," he bragged. I wasn't comfortable with the arrogant tone in his voice. In utter confidence I replied, "That's not true, this was my decision. I wanted to be with you."

On another occasion he asked me, "Do you cry?" I told him, "Crying melts the soul and purifies it."

"When do you cry?"

"When a feeling raises me to its extreme. Yesterday, for example, I was listening to Spanish flamenco, with Nati Mistral reading and singing the poetry of Lorca. There was fire and sorrow in her voice, a life force as present as that found in the poetry of Lorca. Beauty is