Haji Jabir

From *Fatima's Harbor*

Translated by Nancy Roberts

Translator's Reflection

I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to translate *Fatima's Harbor* by Haji Jabir, not only because the narrative swept me along from one page to the next, drawing me continuously into the struggles faced by its main character and those around him, but also because the novel introduces the reader to events and issues that have caused tremendous suffering to many in the author's homeland, yet without the world being properly aware of them. By translating it into English, I'm given the chance to present this important piece of writing to a wider audience.

Fatima's Harbor is one of the few works of fiction that have addressed the plight of Eritrean refugees or the issue of forced migration and displacement within and beyond Africa generally. Although its Arabic edition was published in 2013 (Beirut: Arab Cultural Center), many of the scenes in *Fatima's Harbor* remain tragically accurate reflections of situations and phenomena that persist to this day. According to the 2017–2018 Amnesty International Report on Eritrea, thousands of Eritreans fled the country during the time period covered by the report. Government authorities continue to impose severe restrictions on the right to leave the country while severe human rights violations are committed regularly against those seeking to flee.

The long-standing ordeal faced by Eritrean refugees is an outgrowth of the 30-year War of Independence waged by Eritrea against Ethiopia (1961–1991), coupled with a civil war in Ethiopia and a further outbreak of hostilities between the two governments between 1998 and 2000. The social injustices resulting from these conflicts are rife and deep-seated, especially given the exploitation of the cause of Eritrean liberation in the service of greed and corruption.

This excerpt depicts the plight of Eritreans fleeing to Sudan who are caught up in a nightmare of kidnapping, sexual assault, human trafficking, debt slavery, and an underground trade in illegal organs that leaves people maimed and sometimes dead. The following narrative depicts the disfigurement and enslavement of the human spirit

that take place as a result of such practices, as well as the resiliency of that same spirit and the cyclical nature of human experience—or, put another way, human existence as suffering with threads of compassion, courage, joy, and hope woven in.

From *Fatima's Harbor*

(2)

I woke to excruciating pain in the back of my head. I ran my hand over the place where it hurt. It was moist. I tried to open my eyes, but the glare from the sun was too bright. After repeated attempts, I began to recognize my surroundings.

I was inside a huge steel shipping container with a partially open roof. Next to me lay a number of people, including some women. As I came to, I noticed that most of them were sick or in otherwise bad condition. I tried to get up, but I was too dizzy. My eyes darted back and forth between the door and the people around me. I glimpsed a girl who was staring at me, a frightened look in her eyes. I asked her what was going on, but she looked away and didn't answer.

"*Salaamaat! Salaamaat!* Hope you're feeling better!"

The voice of a man who had just burst into the shipping container aroused terror in those present. He was addressing me, his face plastered with a malevolent grin. Shocks of unkempt hair protruded from beneath his skewed turban, his clothes were tattered, and a Kalashnikov rifle dangled from his shoulder.

He instructed me to get up. When I told him I was in too much pain, he grabbed me by my shirt and pulled me roughly toward him, forcing me to stand up in spite of myself before thrusting me just as forcefully to the floor.

"*Goom, wa khallii 'annak al-dal'. Hallil nawmtak!*" he barked.[1]

I hadn't understood a word he said, and he didn't give me a chance to ask for clarification but stalked out in a hurry. When I looked over again at the people around me, fear was written all over their faces.

Before long I started hearing a commotion and mingled voices. Then a number of young men and women were brought in, their hands and feet bound, and the door slammed shut behind them. By this time the place was wall-to-wall people, forcing me to huddle where I sat.

But finally I had a chance to start figuring out what was going on.

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[1] "Get up, and cut the spoiled brat act. Make yourself useful!"

One of them said, "We've been detained by the Shifta,[2] and they won't let us continue on to Sudan unless we pay up."

"Pay up? What do the Shifta have to do with your going to Sudan?" I asked.

The guy sitting next to me was about to answer my question when he was distracted by the sound of chains at the door. Two men came in, grabbed the sick girl next to me, and led her out amid her hysterical screams.

"Khadija's time ran out today. I knew as soon as you got here."

I shot the guy a questioning look.

"The Shifta give everybody a time limit to pay what they owe before they send them to Sinai, especially if they're sick. It generally happens when a new prisoner comes."

"And what about you? When will your time be up?"

As the commotion in the shipping container died down, Abraham started telling his story. He had fled from military service four months earlier, and the Shifta had agreed to deliver him to Sudan for 3,000 dollars. He'd managed to pay half of it in advance by selling his mother's gold, but he hadn't been able to come up with the other half. And Abraham's troubles hadn't stopped there. As soon as the authorities in Asmara learned of his escape, they jailed his sick mother as a way of pressuring him to come back, saying that unless he did, she would have to pay 50,000 nafkas in return for her release.

Abraham teared up as he talked about the irony in the fact that in essence, both he and his mother were being held for ransom—he by a gang, and she by the State.

"The government awarded my mother 5,000 nakfas when my brother was martyred after volunteering to go to war, and here they are demanding that she pay 50,000 nakfas to punish us for my not wanting to join the army!"

He told me what he'd been through at Sawa, which was what had driven him to run away. Listening to Abraham was like hearing

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[2] Translator's note: The term *shiftā*, used in Eritrea and some parts of Sudan, means "gang" or "highway robbers."

the same story for the hundredth time, so often had I experienced the very same things. And it was no different when he got to the part about what he'd been through with the Shifta.

"We're forced to gather firewood, graze the livestock, and clean the Shifta's cars in return for our food. But I'm trying to work extra hours so that I can reduce the amount I owe."

Listening to Abraham, another irony became apparent to me as I recalled what Kaddani had said about the way the Eritrean government put university students to work in return for food.

Abraham started talking again, so I turned my attention back to him.

I asked him about some of the sick women and elderly. Pointing to one corner of the shipping container, he replied, "That woman may be the next one to be taken away after Khadija. She still hasn't found anybody to pay the rest of the money she owes. As for the kids, God knows what'll happen to them. Most of them get smuggled to Sinai."

The word "Sinai" kept coming up as Abraham talked. I wanted to ask him about it, but our conversation was interrupted when a Shiftai came in. He gestured to me, so I got up and followed him out. We went into a small tent where there was a group of men surrounded by a collection of Kalashnikovs and cell phones. A woman was preparing coffee for them, while two others were busy cleaning the tent and washing clothes.

"You've got a week to come up with 25,000 nakfas, or else we'll come up with some arrangement of our own for you. Until then, you've got to work and make yourself useful."

Replying to the one who appeared to be the leader, I said, "I never made any agreement with you all to be taken to Sudan in the first place. You took my car, kidnapped me, and brought me here against my will."

He just laughed and was joined by the others.

"Well, now that you're here, you're here, like it or not!"

I remembered my mother, who had always warned me, "Never trust a Shiftai, even if he's your brother. Treachery runs

in their blood. It's enough to know that during the revolution,[3] they used to steal the rebels' weapons, then sell them back to them."

I used to come in contact with them while I was pasturing livestock in the open areas around Ghinda, and we would have brief exchanges. But if I asked them what village they were from, I never got any answer. And I was always amazed at their coarse way of talking. So I asked my mother about them, and she told me they'd come to Eritrea recently from some distant desert, which helped to explain why their speech, their manners, and their way of dressing were so different from ours. People had called them various names at first, but the one that stuck was "highway robbers," so much so that the term came to be understood automatically to refer to them.

When I got back to the shipping container, I told Abraham what had happened with me.

"Welcome, friend, to the Shifta State!" he replied with bitter sarcasm.

(3)

The next morning, I was assigned the task of transferring piles of firewood from the back of a large truck to a storage tent. It was hard for me to lift even a single bundle, but I wasn't allowed to rest. An armed Shiftai stood some distance away watching me and others, and he would punish anybody who stopped working by doubling his duties.

At noon we got our first break. I felt a lifetime of weariness sweeping over me. Together with other workers exhausted from their various tasks, I came straggling back into the shipping container, where we were awaited by dry bread and lentils. I was ravenous, but I made a point of eating really slowly, hoping to gain as much time as I could away from the misery of the firewood. I wasn't alone, as it was obvious that everybody was resorting to the same trick.

I looked around in search of Abraham, but he hadn't come yet. The time flew by, and before I knew it, the Shiftai was ordering us

[3] Translator's note: A reference to the Eritrean War of Independence, fought between September 1, 1961, and May 24, 1991, for autonomy from Ethiopia.

back to work. When I reached the work site, I found two additional trucks parked next to the one I hadn't finished yet. My taskmaster told me I would have to finish all three truckloads by sundown. He was obviously trying to get a rise out of me, so I thought it best to make no objection.

By sunset, I had nearly finished all three truckloads, but I couldn't feel my hands anymore, and my back hurt so much I was nearly doubled over from the pain. I asked the Shiftai to let me put off what was left till the next morning, but he rejected the request out of hand, so I was forced to keep going.

I came back to the shipping container in shackles, dragging my feet from sheer exhaustion, and collapsed into an empty corner. It wasn't until quite some time later that Abraham came in. He looked dog-tired, and I was shocked to see his feet covered with bloody wounds. Stretching out beside me, he asked how my first day had gone, so I told him what had happened with me. When I asked him about his day, he told me he'd been working nonstop since morning to shrink the debt he owed. He hadn't even eaten.

"It's best," he said. "This way I can shorten my time here."

I felt sorry for Abraham. I ran my fingers over the inner pocket where I kept the money Jibril had given me together with what I'd saved up during my time working for Hajj Burhan. I wished I could put an end to his suffering and mine by paying what we both owed the Shifta. Then we could leave for Sudan together.

Interrupting my train of thought, Abraham said, "Don't worry about me. As long as I'm useful to the Shifta, I can at least protect myself from their trickery. After being here so long, I've gotten to know what makes them tick. Actually, I knew a lot about them before I got here."

What he'd said piqued my curiosity. I asked him to tell me more about them.

"The Shifta—'the Gang'—are nomadic Bedouin who came to Sudan after their territories were hit by drought. Then the sharifs, or nobility, joined forces against them and drove them off their lands. They lived in Sudan for a period of time until the Mahdist Revolt that began in 1881. When the Mahdists waged war on them, the Shifta sought refuge in Eritrea, where they established friendly rela-

tions with the Italians. But most of them went back to Sudan as soon as the Mahdi was defeated and his revolt had been put down."

"I didn't see any of them at Sawa."

"The Shifta have Sudanese citizenship, and they take advantage of it to get out of military service in Eritrea, just as they use their Eritrean citizenship to weasel out of any responsibilities in Sudan. This has made it easy for them to move back and forth across the Sudanese-Eritrean border. Did you know that they have satellite phones and four-wheel drive trucks and jeeps? And it's all been made possible by smuggling operations."

"Human smuggling, you mean?"

"Yeah. Some of them work smuggling people into Sudan, and business is booming, as you can see. But others smuggle arms and other merchandise in and out of the country, and they enjoy protection from influential generals."

Our conversation was interrupted when the shipping container door opened again. A Shiftai stuck his head inside and pointed to a girl sitting in another corner. Without saying a word or making any objection, she got up and followed him, her eyes glued to the floor.

"That's Zainab. The Shifta rape her in return for reducing the debt she owes. We haven't been able to do anything. Somebody tried to object at first and they shot him dead."

What Abraham had just told me left me stunned. My blood boiling, I got up from where I sat, my fatigue suddenly giving way to a world-shattering rage. Abraham grabbed my hand, begging me not to doom myself to destruction.

"You won't do Zainab any good by getting yourself killed. If I had 1,000 dollars, which is all she has left of a 3,000 dollar debt, I would have helped her get out a long time ago. I've offered to double the work I do for them in return for their letting her go, but they refuse."

I had no idea that the Shifta were demanding that much from anybody. I felt paralyzed with helplessness. I could see now how hard it would be to free even myself. And to think I'd been fantasizing about taking Abraham with me! My breathing grew calmer, but my mind kept going in circles. I'd started weighing my own need for money against Zainab's and Abraham's, and I hated myself for it. It

was obvious how terribly they were suffering. But at the same time, I felt overwhelmed by my own pain.

Sensing my inner struggle, Abraham started trying to make me feel better.

"Don't worry," he said. "There's not much left. Zainab will get out soon, and so will I. All I've got left to pay now is 500 dollars."

I was gripped by indecision all over again, only this time, it was fiercer than ever. What I had, although it wasn't enough to buy my own freedom, would be enough to liberate Zainab and Abraham. I debated over whether to work for the Shifta for a while until I could pay what I owed, or do what it took right then and there to ensure the release of the other two. What finally settled the matter for me was the sight of a broken Zainab trudging meekly toward her torture chamber.

Suddenly I got up and headed for the door. I knocked on it as hard as I could until a Shiftai came. I told him I needed to see his commander about an important matter. He shut the door in my face, but after a while he came back, let me out, and escorted me to a nearby tent.

The minute I was allowed in to see their commander, I announced, "I want to pay."

He guffawed, "If only a fraction of them were like you and only took a day to cough up the cash!"

The commander called one of his subordinates and instructed him to get the car ready to take me to the border at dawn. As the man came toward me to release me from my shackles, I said quickly, "I'm paying for Zainab and Abraham."

Abraham and the others were surprised to see me coming back to the tent accompanied by Zainab, no longer in shackles. Even before I'd had a chance to sit down, he started raining me with questions.

"Oh," I said evasively. "I found a way to get her out. And not just for tonight—forever. I found a way to get you out too."

Abraham sat staring at me, waiting for me to explain the last thing I'd said.

All I added was, "Tomorrow the two of you will be driven to the Sudanese border. You'll finally have the chance to get your mother out of jail and start a new life."

Abraham tried repeatedly to figure out how I'd managed to win his release, but I succeeded in avoiding his many questions. I was starting to get drowsy, but I noticed Zainab coming over to me.

"Thank you," she said. "I'll never forget what you did for me, and I hope I can repay you some day."

Wanting to alleviate her sense of indebtedness toward me, I urged her to take care of herself and not to let anybody hurt her or take advantage of her ever again. But then I remembered something that she could do for me in return. I hesitated to say what it was, since my preoccupation seemed so trivial now by comparison with all Zainab had endured in this hellhole. But in the end, her inquisitive glances weighted the scales in favor of my heart's desire. So, despite my embarrassment and reservations, I asked her to look for Salma on her way home and to tell her that I loved her and had never forgotten her. Then I launched into my usual description of her:

"Salma's on the tall side," I said. "She's got a smooth, dark complexion, thick black hair, and a little mole along the edge of her upper lip. She also has an adorable speech impediment, as she can't say the 'r' quite right. Her hands . . ."

My voice trailed off as I engrossed myself in the sight of Salma in my mind's eye.

Her hands are the hearth that welcomes me home in an unwelcoming world, and in her arms, wishes turn to dreams that don't know the meaning of impossible. Out of her pristine smile flow springs of delight. Her presence . . .

Abraham was approaching, so, coming out of my poetic reverie, I changed the subject, telling Zainab and Abraham to prepare themselves for a new life. Then we all went to sleep.

Early the next morning, I slipped half the money I had left into their hands and said goodbye. Zainab tried to thank me again, but I cut her off, and she promised to look for Salma. The two of them got into a Land Rover that sped away with them down a sandy road before vanishing from sight. I thought back on the car that had fired at me and blown out my tire. So, then: it must have been a smuggling operation like the one that had just taken off with Zainab and Abraham.

I was jolted out of my reverie by the voice of the Shiftai as he ordered me to start working. I was heading for the firewood truck when he yelled, "Come away from there! You're going to take your brother's place now!"

My previous job had been a picnic compared to what faced me now. After transferring the shackles from my wrists to my feet, the Shiftai handed me a large ax. From where he stood, he pointed to a tree. As I made my way over to it, the protrusions on the iron shackles rubbed harshly against my skin with every step I took. Despite the weight of the ax, he wouldn't allow me to put it down even for a second. I asked him to take the shackles off my ankles so that I could move freely, but he wouldn't do it, justifying his refusal by saying I might try to attack him with the ax. I felt more than ever for Abraham and what he'd gone through cutting down trees all day.

I brought the ax down on the tree trunk with all the strength I could muster, but it wouldn't budge. I made a second try, and a third, as the Shiftai shrieked at me to swing harder. With every blow, more strength seeped out of me until I fell to the ground in exhaustion. The Shiftai started to come over to me, screaming again. Rising heavily to my feet, I took hold of the ax and tried to lift it but couldn't. I tried again, but it fell out of my hand, and I fell on top of it, splitting my head open. Panicking at the sight of my bloodied face, the Shiftai carried me to the truck and had me taken back to the shipping container. I walked in with a bandaged head and bleeding feet. Before closing the door, the Shiftai growled, "Watch your step. Or else, Sinai's waiting for you."

Once again I had the name "Sinai" ringing in my ears but without understanding what it meant. I closed my eyes and fell fast asleep.

No one demanded any work from me for the rest of that day, and by the following day, I'd started to recover my strength. At around noon, the Shiftai who had taken Zainab and Abraham to the Sudanese border came back to the shipping container. With a crafty smile on his face, he took me aside and handed me a piece of paper.

"The brother you did a favor for has done a favor for you this time!"

The paper was from Abraham. It said,

I've chosen the quickest way to ensure my mother's release and to reward you for what you did for me. After Zainab told me everything that happened, the only solution I could see was to have the Shiftai turn me over to the Eritrean border guard. He gets a hefty reward that he can split with you, and with that you can buy your own freedom. All I ask is that you keep this a secret from the rest of his gang. This way, my mother can go home. As for me, I'll deal with my own fate. Don't worry about me. The time I spent in the Shifta State toughened me up.

The letter distressed me on two accounts: first, on account of the lifetime Abraham had spent being tormented by the Shifta and, second, on account of the fact that even this torment hadn't led to his deliverance.

And when the gang member came back to talk to me again, he made things even worse:

"Tell me," he said. "I hope this letter is worth it. The poor guy nearly died to get it to you."

The Shiftai handed me the money, stressing the importance of keeping the deal a secret between us. When I asked him why he'd kept his promise to Abraham and betrayed his friends, he shocked me by saying that it had nothing to do with keeping promises but rather with making a profit. In other words, honesty is necessary in order to preserve the trust required to keep certain crimes going, since otherwise everything will collapse.

"So," I asked him, "if bounty hunting would be more profitable, then why don't you all work in that business instead?"

"Oh," he said. "We don't trust the government. They might sell us out without a moment's notice, whereas runaway soldiers can't do anything to us!

"Anyway," he went on, "get ready. You'll want to set out for Sudan as soon as the sun goes down."

The minute I paid what I owed, the Shifta commander ordered my shackles removed without asking me where the money had come from. Now I understood better what the Shiftai who'd delivered the letter meant by what he said about the importance of keeping com-

mitments: it's the only way to ensure the continuation of crimes more heinous than broken promises.

As the sun set and I got into the car, I cast a final glance at the shipping container bursting at the seams with the ailing and oppressed. I wished I could save them all or, at the very least, ease their suffering, open a pinhole of hope and light onto their painful present. I wished what I had seen were nothing but a nightmare that would dissipate with the first rays of dawn. And I went on wishing until the car began rolling toward the Sudanese border. The shipping container with its tormented occupants receded farther and farther into the distance until the Shifta State disappeared entirely from view.

(4)

The vehicle turned off the road into a thickly wooded area. A short distance later, we came to another Shifta encampment consisting of a large shipping container and, next to it, a small tent. It looked so much like the place we'd been in before, at first I thought we'd gone back to where we'd come from. We were joined by four exhausted-looking people who took seats in the rear, and the vehicle headed back for the sandy road. I wanted to ask the driver about the place where we'd just stopped, but it was easy to see that it was another of the Shifta's improvised jails.

"If we get separated, everybody go back to the last place we were all together."

The driver's instructions put a smile on my face. They brought back memories of when Salma had told me about her school Girl Scout troop.

> *Today our team beat the other team, but just barely, and that was thanks to me! I remembered an important scout rule that says that if the team members get separated for any reason, they should go back to the last point where they were all together. This is what enabled us to win just when we were about to lose!*

The only thing there to dispel the darkness of the night and my nonstop thoughts was the driver's loud voice as he made phone calls

asking whether the road was safe. I understood some of what he said, but most of it went past me.

Whenever I asked him how long it would be before we got to Sudan, I got the same one-word reply: "*Shway* . . . in a little bit."

Leaning over toward him so the others wouldn't hear me, I asked him if he'd ever transported a girl by the name of Salma.

Looking at me in surprise, he replied matter-of-factly that he'd never been interested in knowing the name of anybody he'd transported.

Straightening up in my seat and peering into the dark void before me, I started describing her: "Salma's on the tall side," I said. "She's got a smooth, dark complexion, thick black hair, and a little mole along the edge of her upper lip. She also has an adorable speech impediment, as she can't say the 'r' quite right. Her presence . . ."

I stared through the windshield into the distance, summoning Salma's radiance in the midst of my darkness. No longer speaking to the Shiftai, I continued. "There's a glow to her presence that lends a special hue to both time and place, turning our moments into a memory that even years would be hard-pressed to erase. When she's with me, all else—however magical or brilliant—pales into nothingness."

The driver slowed down, his features registering what appeared at first to be a dull non-comprehension. But then suddenly he laughed out loud and, turning to me, exclaimed, "Well, if a girl like that got in my truck, I'd forget my own name, and I'd never let her go!"

Once again the driver veered onto a side road, at the end of which appeared a dim light that grew gradually brighter as we got closer to it until at last its source came into view: a number of four-wheel drive vehicles encircling a fire that would periodically flare as someone threw a log or branch into its flaming belly. Our vehicle joined the circle of fire and, after turning off the engine, the driver got out with a sword in his hand. In this he was followed by the drivers of the other vehicles which, I noted, bore Saudi and Kuwaiti license plates. A guy sitting next to me explained that the cars had been smuggled into the country.

Ams al-masaa . . . ghaabat al-shams.

Yesterday evening . . . the sun went down.

Ams al-masaa . . . ghaabat al-shams.

Yesterday evening . . . the sun went down.

The gang members divided themselves into two groups facing each other, one on either side of the fire, clapping and repeating the same phrase in song:

Ams al-masaa . . . ghaabat al-shams.

Yesterday evening . . . the sun went down.

Positioned between the two groups, a gang member danced nimbly with his sword. Facing one of the two groups, he moved the sword gracefully through the air, and its members began singing with greater gusto. Then he turned to the other group, and the same interaction ensued. The scene seemed to be building up to a climax. The more intense the sword-bearer's movements, the more enthusiastic the singers around him grew.

Ams al-masaa . . . ghaabat al-shams.

Yesterday evening . . . the sun went down.

I wondered why they would go on repeating a single phrase the entire time. It was likewise a mystery to me how they could enjoy dancing and singing in the middle of what, to me at least, was nothing but a dark, scary night. Even so, I and those with me were transfixed by the euphoric state that had come over the gathering. I also noticed that the refrain was divided between the two groups. It would begin with one group and end with the other as if in a never-ending counterpoint.

The driver came back drenched in perspiration, his enduring state of rapture plainly visible on his features. We passengers had climbed on top of the vehicle to get a good view of the scene, so he gestured us back to our places. The circle of vehicles had broken up by now, but that had done nothing to dampen his spirits: *Ams al-masaa . . . ghaabat al-shams.*

Looking back at us as he sang, the driver began gesturing with his hand. We didn't understand at first what he was asking us to do. But then he interrupted his singing long enough to say quickly: "Come on now, sing along with me: *Ams al-masaa . . . ghaabat al-shams.*"

We started repeating it with him, but our inability to keep up to his liking soured his mood.

"Never mind! Shut up now, you goddamned slaves."

There ensued an awkward silence, which I broke by asking him whether he considered himself an Eritrean. He gave me a disconcerted look before replying with a laugh, "Yes . . ."

"So," I asked, "Why would you refer to us as 'slaves' if you consider yourself one of us?"

He got a more serious look on his face. "Are you upset? Don't be. I didn't mean to insult you. That's the only name we've had for you for as long as I can remember. What do you want me to call you?"

Not in the mood to go on with the conversation, I looked away into the lightless expanse. Then suddenly another question came to mind. I asked him where he was from originally and whether he ever visited home.

"Where?" he said. "Home? From the time my ancestors had to leave it, nobody's been able to go back."

The Shiftai went on talking about Eritrea and how it had been a place of refuge for his ancestors when they'd been fleeing for their lives. He spoke about the country with such affection and gratitude that I felt confused, and I finally came to the conclusion that he couldn't see the inconsistency between this love and gratitude and the things he was doing. On the contrary, he seemed entirely at peace with his way of life, as though he'd never known anything else. For a moment there, I actually felt sorry for him. It occurred to me that the Shiftai and his victim were only separated by the most illusory of lines and that, in one way or another, the Shifta were victims themselves.

Getting back on his phone, the Shiftai slowed down and started looking left and right until he came to a full stop. All of us had started glancing around nervously when suddenly another Shiftai appeared, drawing a camel behind him. The two men stepped aside for a time, after which the driver came back and ordered us out of the vehicle.

"Come on now, you," he said. "You'll go the rest of the way with my brother here."

Nobody had the energy to argue with him. The Shiftai got into his vehicle and headed back to where he'd come from. We started looking back and forth at each other and at the new Shiftai, who

was busy sorting some heavy ropes. After attaching the ropes to the camel's gear, he mounted the animal and ordered us to hold onto the ropes.

The camel took off, and we followed it on foot, clutching the ropes that dangled from it on either side as the Shiftai alternately sped up and slowed down. Eventually we came to an area which he told us was the last point where the Eritrean border guard was stationed.

I noticed search lights scanning the area, turning every dark spot into day. Dismounting quickly, the Shiftai knelt his camel and told us to get down. We stayed this way until the searchlights had passed. When he got up again, he shouted for us to run as fast as we could. Then, as soon as the searchlights came back in our direction, he went prostrate again. We kept on alternately running and going down on our bellies, our panting nearly rending the veil of the surrounding darkness. Even the camel seemed to have been trained to move instinctively away from the light, as it would halt of its own accord the minute it began approaching.

Once we were out of the searchlight's range, the Shiftai stopped and pointed to a road at the end of which there was another point of light.

"That's where you want to go," he said. "Once you've gotten there, you'll be in Sudan."

No sooner had the man finished speaking than we took off as fast as our legs would carry us. We were all fighting off our fatigue, giving this last leg of the journey everything we had. Sudan was getting closer and, with it, our most cherished hopes. I could see Salma in the point of light before me. She was smiling, waiting to put an end to the exhaustion of the days I'd endured without her, ready to wash away the agony of suspense, to refill my spirit drained dry by despair.

When I saw Salma, I knew my barren days without her were over, or nearly so. She poured down on me like rain, and everything within me turned green and succulent.

Spurred on by her beaming countenance, I got ahead of everybody else. Their panting was getting louder and louder, but they were no less determined than I was. I imagined what their wishes

might be at this watershed moment. I imagined what the point of light meant to each one of them given the suffering that had been etched deep in their spirits.

There was a troubling moment when suddenly I thought about the fact that our salvation now lay in turning our backs to the homeland, in fleeing from it filled with a chaotic mishmash of fear and hope, doubt and certainty. It reminded me of something Kaddani had said: "The 'homeland' is a white lie that some promote without feeling guilty and which others latch onto without feeling duped."

As Sudan drew nearer, Eritrea began slipping away. After all, homelands are selfish: Neither of them would come around unless the other one left.

I can say with certainty of those who were running alongside me that as badly as they wanted to escape from their homeland, this very escape also caused them pain, and that as intent as they were on finding a life outside their own country, it would have terrified them for this country to die within them or for it to slip out through their ribs unnoticed before they'd been able to tuck it into the last hidden recesses of their souls.

I can say with certainty that these people were leaving Eritrea with disappointment seared indelibly on their brows, like church bells that, hardly having ceased to ring, announce themselves anew.

I can say with certainty that any country that no longer has room for its own people will find plenty of room for suffering and pain.

I can say with certainty that at that critical moment, they dreaded the possibility that as they crossed over into Sudan, they would be riddled with memories of childhoods spent on backstreets, grandmothers' coffee, and story-filled evenings.

I can say with certainty that there was nothing they feared more than their memory. Or rather, that they both feared it and feared for it, for now it had become their last line of defense in an unequal battle.

We ran with all our might while doing our best to avoid the broom bushes the villagers had planted as food for their livestock and as buffers against the sand dunes that encroached on their villages. As we fled, I thought about how badly we need "broom bushes" of another kind to prevent us from encroaching on each other's home-

lands, to act as buffers that can preserve our hopes, our dreams, and even our memories from ruin.

By now we were so close to the light that we couldn't see anything beyond it. A voice ordered us to kneel and place our hands on top of our heads. A man came up to us, brandishing a rifle in our faces. He was followed by others who bound us and searched us, then escorted us to the room of an officer who asked us why we had crossed the border. He grilled us on our military divisions and the weapons we'd been trained to use. Then he issued instructions for us to be taken to a prison that was bursting at the seams with fugitive Eritreans.

We were in the Sudanese border guard jail for several days. Every day we were packed in tighter than we had been the day before. Not an hour passed without a new group arriving, the weariness of a lifetime etched on their features.

Then deliverance came at last.

One morning, soldiers started taking us out in groups. When my turn came, I was brought again before the officer, who fingerprinted me, took a photo of me, and affixed it to my file, which I noticed had a number on it. Then he handed me a piece of paper that read "S-257307."