

Echoes

Novel excerpt / Literary historical fiction

Opening sequence.

I want you to imagine the moment you are finally, irrevocably forgotten. When that last person who knew your name breathes their last breath, their thoughts fading into nothingness, taking with them the last vestiges of your life story.

For some the horrible moment happens in as little time as a generation. For a select few, it will take centuries, millennia. But in the end, the inexorable current of time is too insistent, too swift and powerful. Too many lives come into being in the intervening years, too many people caught up in the intoxicating flow of their own lives. In the face of this, they simply do not have the space for you, for the stories of you.

Generation by generation, bits of you calve away, lost to an oblivion from which no living mind can dredge the memories locked up inside the heads of the dead.

That is why, even after all these years, we carve our names in stone. But even stones fade, and cemeteries are turned under to make room for new occupants. And if there is not a god above - and there is not, I am here to tell you, not as you would know it - you are left with nothing.

Not a soul emancipated or some permanent residence in the great fields of paradise. No, and I tell you from experience, what is left is ice and darkness without dimension. There is no better way to put it. A loneliness so vast and eternal it freezes the heart to the point of shattering.

We are not meant to be alone like that, isolated forever and without reprieve.

Maybe you agree with me, and I hope you do. Because then you might understand, even if at first you find it repellent, why I have done what I have done.

Asyut, Egypt, 1849

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The Madness comes to Ibrahim once more.

It has long been within him, but he has until recently had the strength of mind to resist it.

Now, though, he is old and dying. He thinks it may be a day or two at most before it's all over.

His will is abandoning him, his mind growing ever cloudier. He forgets things and names, momentarily loses track of where he is and what he is doing. There is enough left in his mind, however, to know that he can never give in to the Madness. It's why long ago he quit the world, sequestered himself in this humble hut alongside the Nile.

Here the Madness will not spread from him like the pox that it is. He is its keeper, his decrepit body its cage. Even so, in these last few days, as his mind grows ever foggier, he knows it senses his growing weakness.

Ibrahim, it says to him. The time has come.

Ibrahim shakes his head, and were there witnesses to this private conversation, they would think they looked upon a man at odds with himself, a madman arguing with nothing.

They would be wrong.

That thing in Ibrahim's company, though it cannot be touched or seen, is in many ways more real than he is. He will die soon, and his corpse will sink away into the earth, and he will be no more. But the Madness, if it is not suppressed - by him, in these, his last days - the Madness will be forever.

Do not call me the Madness, the voice in his head says.

The voice is sweet and reasonable, as it always is. It coos like a lover, though its intent is diabolical.

Come, Ibrahim, it says, we have known each other long enough. Call me by my name.

Ibrahim tightens his lips and does not know whether what he says is audible to the world or only in his head.

You do not have a name. You are the nameless.

He feels the Madness rumble in his chest, effectively laughing through him. Funny that you call me the nameless when you are the one person that knows my real name.

That is because I have taken your name away from you, Ibrahim returns. I have sealed it up inside myself like a tomb, and now the pox of you can never again be spread to the world.

There is only silence after this, and Ibrahim is briefly confused. He looks out at the banks of the Nile just beyond his small hut, and a familiar dynamic descends upon his brain. His sense of time abandons him, and he cannot remember the context of anything. Where is he?

His home.

He looks to his hands and sees in them the humble blade he has long used to gut his catch from the river. There is a fish there at his feet - a fish he must surely have just caught, as it still glistens in the late afternoon sun.

But more important who was he talking to? Why is his hand clenched so tightly around the old blade that his knuckles are whit

Your mind is quitting on you, Ibrahim, a voice says inside his head. It's called senility. Ibrahim tries to reorient himself. This voice - it is familiar.

It is wicked beyond measure. It must be resisted, though why is, for the moment, lost to him.

You were a great man, Ibrahim. You have done amazing things, and yet you live out here as a hermit and no one knows about it. You have seen things few men have ever seen. You have touched eternity itself. And yet your exploits will die with you.

Ibrahim feels himself groping through the fog of his mind. His thoughts cannot hold their form as before. There is only this disorienting haze that falls with ever greater regularity over his

senses and memory. The gaps within it that afford him clarity grow fewer and farther between as the days wear on and he speeds ever faster toward death.

Who -

Who again -

Is this voice in his head?

He knows only that somewhere deep down, there is a memory in him - a memory not of the mind, composed of information, but one of the heart, composed of emotion - that evokes something intense and desperate. He must fight this voice in his head at all costs.

My exploits will die, God willing, Ibrahim says to the Madness, and yours will die alongside them, which is the important part.

No, Ibrahim, the voice coos. Go into town. Share your memories before your mind goes. Let them know of your discoveries, the things you unearthed all those years ago with your shovel.

Ibrahim's mind wheels again into the fog. He tries to steel himself, tries to regain his bearing.

This is the fight of all fights, he knows it is. And yet the Madness . . . why again must he resist it so fully, to the exclusion of all else?

Go into town, the voice comes again.

To his horror, Ibrahim feels an impulse moving through him that is not his own. He is rising to his feet.

Go into town.

A sense of dread washes through him. His body is not his own! How weak his mind has become, how confused!

He summons all his will, focusing the dim iris of his mind, and his body obeys him again.

No, I will not move. I am your cage, remember? Not the other way around. The last of your being lives only in me. Call it what you want, by ancient names or new - your ren, your reputation, your pox. It will all die with me.

He is met with only silence, within his head and without.

Again comes that impulse that is not his own, as if someone is burrowing into the unconscious pathways of his mind and compelling his body to act. His sandals shift in the dirt, and he is starting to move.

Yes, Ibrahim, I understand. But you sell yourself for a piastre when you are worth a pound.

A hundred pounds, a thousand, a million! Did you not hear me? I said you have touched eternity!

Go, let them hear your story and fete you as you properly deserve to be feted!

Ibrahim feels the fog in his head thicken in a way it has not before. It is dark and all-encompassing, and something in him knows it will not clear this time. His mind will quit his body anytime now, and the Madness knows this.

His feet carry him a few more steps along the bank, past his hut, until he can see, far in the distance, through all the sycamores, the two minarets of distant Asyut. Beyond the city the great gebel looms, that monolithic mountain honeycombed with ancient tombs, the insides of each of which he knew intimately in his youth.

That place he made his name before it was forgotten by the world.

Go, Ibrahim. Get your due.

Dizzy with confusion, Ibrahim briefly does not recognize the name just spoken to him - his own.

A great panic besets him.

His mind is winking out, likely for the final time.

Who am I? he says.

No answer comes.

Who am I?

Again, no answer comes.

Then something rises up within him - another truth of the heart rather than the mind - and

he knows for a fleeting and shimmering moment that he is Ibrahim Gamal, greatest of the fellaheen diggers that worked the sands of Asyut and perhaps the rest of upper Egypt as well.

Ah, now you see the magnificence of yourself. You need to be remembered, Ibrahim.

Ibrahim feels the world falling away from him, his grip on things growing diffuse.

There is no more time. He dimly knows he must do what he should have done all those years before.

No, he says to the Madness, focusing all his remaining energies on the knife still gripped in his left hand. Not remembered. Forgotten.

He draws the blade across his right wrist, making sure to dig as deeply as possible so that no vein there goes unsevered. He feels great spasms somewhere deep within him as blood splashes from him.

The spasms are not his own.

It's the Madness's turn to panic.

We die together, Ibrahim says.

But the silent fog of confusion returns, widening, rendering all that he thinks and perceives indistinct. Whether it's from the blood that ebbs from his body or the continuing deterioration of his mind, his vision grows dim, and the noises of the world grow spectral and distant. He only wishes to sit down, then lie down, then be done with the great struggle of life once and for all. Instead, his body defies him, wavering there on its feet.

He tries again to sit - even to collapse - and he cannot! His body - that body that once served as cage to the Madness - now no longer responds to his own thoughts and impulses!

It occurs to him with dread that it is he who is in the cage now. His only hope is that the blood will drain from him in enough volume, and soon enough, that this will all be over.

Instead, his feet move - unsteadily, an old man's failing gait - toward Asyut in the distance.

We will do it together, then, Ibrahim, the voice whispers sweetly. With your last breaths, we

will tell your story, and your name will spread beyond this cloistered life you have made for yourself. Your ren will survive long after you're gone, meaning, in truth, that you will never be gone.

And if a name is pox, as you so claim, then the contagion of mine - once you have spoken it in the context of your own exploits - will eclipse the weak contagion of your own. And you, who held yourself so superior to me all these years, will see who posterity favors.

For history is a contagion just as much as any plague.

The pathways of reputation through time are labyrinthine and unknowable, but in the end, it's that which is most extreme and audacious - horrific, if you like - that spreads.

We will do it together, Ibrahim. We will go into town and tell your story. We will find those most susceptible to the pox.