International Journal of Middle East Studies (2020), **52**, 506–509
doi:10.1017/S002074382000063X

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

ROUNDTABLE

The Gravel on Our Beds

Muhammad El-Hajj
*Corresponding author. E-mail: muhammad.elhajj@gmail.com
Translated by Yasmine Zohdi, yasmine.zohdi@gmail.com

One evening in the summer of 2010, after an outing with friends, I took the metro from downtown back to my parents' house in Dokki. I shared the near-empty car with a group of teenagers. The sliding door had been about to close in preparation for the train to leave the station when two boys got off the escalator, rushed over, and held the door open so their friends could follow. Those friends took their time, fooling around as they strolled toward the train, knocking each other's caps off their heads, as though deliberately trying to keep the train waiting as long as they could. I was exhausted and sleepy, but the situation stirred my interest, and my anger as well. A few raucous moments later—after the train's alarm had started to sound—they all finally entered the car, continuing their pushing and shoving inside. I looked at the few passengers around me; it seemed no one else was paying attention. I glanced back at the boys, who were now debating whether they could get away with pushing the train's emergency button as a joke.

I really wanted to intervene, but the truth is even at my age—I was twenty-four back then—I actually feared the herds of teenagers roaming Cairo's streets. In my own teenage years, I had suffered two beatings at the hands of similar groups of boys: once on the street after I'd just come out of a private tutoring session and another on a school-day afternoon in a brawl with the students of a neighboring boys' school in Dokki—not to mention the countless times I'd been verbally harassed; for my long hair or because I was walking down the street with a girl or anything else that happened not to sit well with a crowd of males that age. I went on following the scene before me, and all the while in my head, in the silly world of my ideals, another scene unfolded. In that parallel scene, I have words with those kids and I end up victorious, using my ability (my imagined ability, of course) to give off an air of seriousness and danger. The scene ends with them trembling and forced to flee in fear. It was all an attempt to get back at Cairo, at the endless absurdity and my own fear of the physical violence that permeated the city's poorer neighborhoods, setting a very specific definition of traditional masculinity that I dreaded and could never identify with. When I got home, I opened a Word document, wrote down my imagined version of the scene I had just witnessed, and posted it on my blog.

Years later, I wanted to go to New York and I was broke, so I decided to search for a residency of some kind. Finally, amid a sea of opportunities for visual art and contemporary dance and all kinds of art I did not practice, I found a residency for short story writers. I had never really written short stories before, but after years of avidly reading literature and writing texts that fell somewhere between memoir and poetry and fiction, not to mention screen writing, which was my main profession at the time, I thought it would be easy to write something for the application. But I couldn't think of anything. Until I remembered that scene. I searched for the text I'd written that night and started weaving a story that would later become the first in my debut collection of short fiction.

This is how Cairo inspires me: the violence, the spectacular eloquence that confounds and captivates. It is like living inside one of Pieter Brueghel the Younger's boisterous canvases; wherever you direct your eyes, something is happening. At any given point in Cairo's day-to-day, there is an idea, a feeling, an image, a composition, sounds and leaps and events—there is something. Cairo consumes me: as a historical particularity, as a heavy presence in the hearts of her residents, as a scope that has not yet been fully discovered, as a constant metaphor for larger things.

In *Villa 69* (2013), my first feature film as a screenwriter, the protagonist is a Cairo-based architect who has decided to spend his final days alone in an old villa he has inherited from his father. When she finds out he is sick, his sister breaks his self-imposed isolation and moves in with him, bringing

© The Author(s) 2020. Published by Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002074382000063X Published online by Cambridge University Press

her grandson along. At first, he resists their presence in the space he had so carefully designed to await death, but, in the end, he learns that company is better, even if death lies at the end of the road—particularly because death always lies at the end of the road. I was trying to embrace the change taking place in the city and to promise the arrival of something new, a death that would free up space for whatever follows, without bitterness or fear. I wrote the film's main outline and three drafts of the screenplay before the 25 January Revolution, but it was filmed only a few months before the events of 30 June 2013 and their aftermath. In the script, the description of the film's closing shots is limited to specifying that the car occupied by the characters heads toward downtown. The day that sequence was shot, however, a large group of bikers was crossing the Qasr el-Nil bridge, and several tents stood in the middle of Tahrir Square, remnants of a sit-in that had thinned out. The presence of these elements in the film's final moments bestowed upon it a spirit and a meaning so particular to Cairo, evoking everything I wanted to say without me ever having to say it explicitly. It was as though the city completed the words I spoke, because I never spoke about anything else to begin with.

I am enamored with everything that Cairo offers: the excessive beauty, the surprises hidden in the least expected places, the persistence of life in spite of everything. In my short stories I describe the streets the characters walk through in detail because they, too, are characters. I spent most of my life as a resident of Suliman Gohar Street in Dokki. Can one really understand Suliman Gohar without first understanding a small history of the urban expansion that took place in that area on the west bank of the Nile? How the lavish houses were first built by wealthy aristocrats and European expats in the first half of the 20th century, and the little village of Bulaq al-Dakrour kept receding until Dokki finally came to be, with its massive villas and Art Nouveau buildings? Or how, years later, government housing projects struggled for space within the neighborhood, providing shelter for thousands who fled the canal cities with the war? Or how one of Egypt's biggest film producers over the last two decades actually started out as a butcher in a small shop in the same neighborhood? In one Goodreads review, a reader complains that he finds my ceaseless commentary about Cairo in the stories of my collection to be really boring. I wasn't really aware when I indulged in such reflections; they were merely digressions in the characters' heads. Do people around the world stop in the middle of their conversations to say something about their city? I don't know, but in Cairo we often do.

I am now 33 years old, and I fear Cairo like I never have before.

In October of last year, Netflix posted a job announcement seeking a synopsis writer for content directed to the Middle East. To further understand the temptation of the job, perhaps it is important to mention that the position was based in Amsterdam. Under normal circumstances, I would not have paid that vacancy a second glance. I was at a good moment in my professional life: my first book had recently been released; it won a reputable literary award; one of my favorite artists and an idol of my youth approached me at the after-party saying he loved my work; I had just received a grant for work on my upcoming project; and I had even more projects on my agenda that I could spend the next decade of my life working on. In light of everything, the Netflix job wasn't really a logical step. But I admit that I did entertain the thought. To bid farewell to Cairo, for awhile at least, or maybe for all time: to quiet down the voices barking in my head, "Leave now, before it's no longer a choice." What's so bad about sitting in on long, tedious meetings to try and figure out the best way to sell content that isn't really that intelligent to viewers who aren't really looking for something that intelligent either? Does anyone ever read those descriptions or care what they say? Was there really even a market for what I'd be writing? Is there really a market for anything anyone writes? More importantly, is there a way to guarantee staying out of prison?

Since 2014, life in Cairo has come to resemble sitting down to eat at a restaurant while all the other patrons scramble out in panic. "How are we going to leave?" is the question on everybody's tongues. For six years now I've been saying goodbye to friends, brothers, comrades. Some have fled in search of a living; some have fled in search of flight itself. Some have fled because their residencies would not be renewed. Some have fled from security threats, subtle and blatant; some have fled from a despair that threatened to crush them. Some have fled to preserve what's left of a rapidly slipping sanity. If there's anything that can be said about the process of creating art in Cairo, it's that we never had the chance to grow together as members of one generation; to learn from one another's practices; to collaborate and exchange experiences and build spaces, to play and experiment. One evening, I sat with Andeel,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002074382000063X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Anwar, and others at al-Nubi, a coffee shop we used to frequent on Qasr el-Aini Street. I remember everyone sharing their most memorable stories of the city's notoriously entertaining (and often annoying) taxi drivers, and going home that night with multiple observations about storytelling, about humor and insight and wit. I learned about art in Cairo's coffee shops more than I ever learned in classes or books. Today we are scattered among our apartments in the city that we prefer not to leave for fear of colliding with the street, and in immigrant neighborhoods across the world's capitals. The only spaces that bring us together are Facebook, the occasional house party, or sporadic encounters during vacations at home or trips abroad.

In every chaos there lies a cosmos, except in Cairo. In Cairo, chaos is chaos, and there are no cosmoses to be found.

In 2015, it seemed for the first time that the moment was over and that everyone had gone their way. We suddenly woke up to the fact that four years had passed and that we'd lost ourselves to public life with no reward. People reacted to this realization in different ways. There were those who completely distanced themselves from political controversy, and others who immersed themselves in it with the determination of someone who lost everything at the gambling table and won't rest until they win back what they've lost. There were those who turned against their old comrades, blaming the defeat on them, and allied themselves with the latest victor in the hope that it might be a way to preserve what was left of the world they knew. And there were those who totally and irrevocably lost their minds, positioning themselves against each and every thing. In the midst of all this, in August of that year, the Egyptian government hired the advertising agency JWT to produce a campaign promoting tourism in Egypt for more than 65 million US dollars.

By virtue of my work in the film industry I knew several people who worked on the advertising campaign. I did not condemn anyone; I know how harsh working in the creative field in Egypt can be. There is no real market for any artistic practice here. Decades of audacious legislative restrictions and surreptitious security interferences coupled with a long history of monopolizing practices conspired to stifle all attempts at creating any form of art. A person who makes art needs to be willing to fund it on their own without waiting for anything in return, or to make do with whatever crumbs they can get in the form of awards or production grants that naturally come with their own agendas. We all make ends meet by taking small jobs here and there, with companies that exploit cheap labor from Southeast Asia, with the communication bureaus of Gulf shaykhs, with cultural institutions whose policies we disapprove of, and sometimes with agencies that produce state-funded ads with the sole aim of whitewashing.

Yet something about this particular campaign was different. Under the slogan "This is Egypt," it coincided with a general trend at the time calling for positivity, one that wasn't confined to the state's official rhetoric but was physically manifested in the form of the New Suez Canal. Later, the Egyptian president—the usurper imam (*al-ʾimam al-mutaghalib*), in the Sunni tradition of the Middle Ages, a notion heavily present in the narrative of the ruling regime—would admit that the main aim of that project (which cost billions of US dollars) was to boost the people's morale.

Under the weight of the heavy defeat experienced by those who had invested in 2011 as a project aimed at building some sort of future for this country, many of them—those who could afford to, by virtue of the social class to which they belonged—shut themselves within socio-geographic bubbles in the suburbs of Cairo and the gated resorts of the North Coast and the Red Sea, eventually succumbing to the state's rhetoric that called for emphasizing the positive. The soundtrack accompanying those who moved within the little bourgeois pockets in the heart of the old capital and the suburbs on its periphery was made up of songs wondering, "Why the long face?" (a remake of "Happy" by Pharell Williams). Why, really? Now that we're defeated, perhaps we were never right to begin with, perhaps the foolishness of our youth merely deluded us into thinking we knew what was best for the world, for ourselves and for our people, whereas in truth we were clueless. Perhaps we should relax, then; enjoy the flood of "positives" in the malls of the Fifth Settlement and on the beaches of Gouna, and simply let things be.

Within this environment, the sheer misery that consumed me at the time felt like some sort of national treason. I wasn't ashamed that I was feeling it, but in certain moments it seemed to my friends, and even to me, that I was indeed gripped by a measure of madness, and much purposeless anger. I doubted my sanity, I doubted everything I'd ever believed in. But when I managed to break free of the grip of my own personal pain, I could feel my mission as a writer and an artist finally crystallize

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002074382000063X Published online by Cambridge University Press

in my head: to speak about misery. To document those erratic feelings that find no room for expression in the clamor of urban life in Cairo, where people are constantly struggling for social ascension and the kind of income levels that can allow them to ignore the political: there is no space to stop, no space to reflect on oneself and one's relationship with the whole. If we must speak, then let us be honest; let us speak about the gravel on our beds, that which is keeping us up at night, without victimization and with absolute acknowledgment that we are not the first to experience such pain. Our pain isn't unique, but it *is* ours, and the only way to guarantee a future of any kind is to address it, to dissect it, to question why it is and how it may subside.

I love open endings; I always try to allow space for that which we don't know, that which we don't expect. Cairo has taught me that things are always happening, that there is always a way. One day I was walking through the alleyways of al-Khalifa in an attempt to reach the Amir Sarghatmish Mosque, where I was to attend a wedding. For a moment I lost my Internet connection, and naturally I lost my way along with it. I looked up from my phone to find myself in a courtyard joining some of the neighborhood's small houses, on the front steps of which the women sat gossiping. In regular circumstances I would have felt nervous; al-Khalifa isn't the friendliest of neighborhoods to outsiders, but a strange tranquility washed over me. In the heart of this neighborhood, brimming with life for more than a thousand years, I felt I was exactly where I was supposed to be. As I studied the worn-down buildings around me, I found myself wishing time would stand still, that I would remain in that same spot forever. I never expected that moment, but it happened; I don't know where those feelings came from, but they did. Just as Cairo grants me patience as she fills me with panic; so, too, she provides me with impossible hope to console me amid the misery she brings.

In the Sufi tradition, an inspiring image recurs, that of the worshipper flying toward God with two wings: one is awe of his power, the other is hope in his mercy and forgiveness. Similarly, I make my way about Cairo with two eyes: one vigilantly aware of her utter cruelties, the other savoring her hidden beauty and inherent compassion. I fear Cairo, I fear ending up hungry or murdered or a picture circulated on Facebook with a post demanding freedom for prisoners. I fear her and I fear losing her to those who see in her nothing more than a string of real estate ventures. I fear her and I am filled with love for her people and a relentless desire to bet on their kindness and wisdom. I fear her and I wonder if life was ever embodied—as pure, condensed meaning—on any place on the face of the earth as it is here?

On 20 September 2019, unexpected protests broke out in Cairo and a couple of other Egyptian cities, promising a significant shift in the dominating mood on the street. The upcoming months and years are likely to bring even more turbulence and pain. If there's one thing I hope for, it is that I find within me the ability to survive; if there's one thing a writer from Cairo aspires to in times of such intense change, it is simply to survive and to keep telling stories—to us, about us—until the end: the end of Cairo as we know it, or the end of our lives.

Muhammad al-Hajj is a writer with experience in film, TV, literary fiction, digital advertising and journalism. His debut short story collection, *Nobody Mourns the City's Cats*, won the Sawiris Cultural Award for Best Short Story Collection (Emerging Writers category).

Yasmine Zohdi is a writer, translator, and is currently the culture editor for Mada Masr. She is currently working on her first collection of short fiction.

Cite this article: El-Hajj M (2020). The Gravel on Our Beds. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* **52**, 506–509. https://doi.org/10.1017/S002074382000063X

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002074382000063X Published online by Cambridge University Press