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Caves of Hydradahose by Salim Barakat is one of the novels featured in the winter 2015 Arabic reading group run by And Other Stories.

Caves of Hydradahose

Salim Barakat

Translated by Sawad Hussain

From the beginning of the novel:

Khartimas and Sosinou's Conversation

“Did you come across the other half of my dream, Hodahose Sosinou?” asked the blond-maned Khartimas as he let out a low whinny from his throat – the throat of a stealthy half-man, half-horse being.

Sosinou sighed as he drew circles of fertile worry in the air, like seeds of winter squash around ponds. “For six days, I close my eyes from night to noon, and still it hasn’t become clear to the imagination of my depths ... no visible pictures or speaking signs, oh Khartimas. Meal times, lunch, dinner: they have become a mystery to me. Don’t you see my waist? My skin is no longer gleaming; it’s the thinness of confusion,” he replied as he cast a look out into the open air through the mouth of the large cave.

“What’s happening in the land of Hydradahose, Sosinou? The yeast of wellness has become bitter. Tomorrow the bread of our conviction will also be bitter,” said

Khartimas as he shook his tail, flicking away one of the many small flies of the fern.

“It’s no longer bearable what Prince Thayouni is doing. Who do you think ignited this spark of hell in his mind? It’s not from the soil of Hydradahose, and not in the nature of its wind – wind of the large caves. He now amuses himself in them, king or prince, by interrogating people about their dreams, Hodahose Khartimas. Survival is doomed here,” said Sosinou. The horizon was sewn shut from his eyes and all he could see was the plains. The sorrow stung his eyes with breaths so bitter they welled

up with tears. “I’ll leave this land with my family. I’ll rid my heart of any sort of yearning for this place.”

Life fell silent. The centaurs descended from the height – which the structure of the caves crowned – to the plains. The two apparitions of man and horse were mixed with those of sowers diligent in the logic of planting, and the friendliness of generous vegetables in their fields.

Thayouni-Hydrahodahose

In the morning of a nice throat, with the faint singing soaked up by the venerable columns of the Hydrahodahose caves – a magical land of dagger-and-horseshoe welders – Prince Thayouni came out of his stone chamber to the foyer of his cave, smiling. The table was rock, rectangular, sixty-six ells in length. On it, in their best form: fruits of shadow and sun next to each other, in bowls. Gladiolus petals, young peeled asparagus stalks and several pumpkin flowers soaked in unripe peach vinegar: this is what Thayouni would savour and drink before he had anything else.

Those faithful to the prince got up. The servants readied themselves, letting out calculated whinnies – as was customary of centaur servant culture – from their throats, faint but powerful in tone. Thayouni sat with his chest to the table. His loyal retinue sat, each with limbs splayed in the manner they found comfortable. They shook the manes dangling over their foreheads before the servants brought the plates within reach of their hands. With their forelegs bent on the marble ground, each centaur sat equidistantly to the next. The prince spoke: “I saw half of a cheerful dream during my night. I’ll wait for Princess Aniksamida’s arrival so she can complete it for me. She has the other half.”

For every creature in Hydrahodahose was another from among those closest to him who shared with him half of his dream. No one dreamt a full dream. No one ever told, other than to his partner, the half of the dream that he had seen, which was made clear with pictures in colour or no colour at all. From the sixth year of these creatures’ lives – with their human torsos stuck to bodies of horses – each would choose a partner with a generous compatibility between the appearance of their dispositions and their depths within. And it never happened, ever, that this accord was violated, for it was taken as a treaty between the two. It was a final choice of residing in the place that was a coincidental agreement between soul and appearance.

These creatures that called out to each other with the epithet Hodahose, before

uttering their personal names, naturally knew that each of every pair possessed half of one full dream. No one went against the convention of keeping his dream to himself and his companion. But they would exchange signals and hints to indicate what had happened in the dream that they shared: “These two passed by fields of gold. Those two ascended a runway of clouds with horseshoes of a metal that isn’t copper. Those two failed to satisfy their appetite.” They possessed the acute discernment of guessing what had happened in the dream, or with a psychological measurement they speculated their conditions after dreams that seduced the imagination of their sleep: disappointment, delight, nightmare, satisfaction, discord, agitation, restriction, anxiety; all these lingered in the eyes after waking up due to sleep’s light footsteps. Nevertheless, guessing remained just that, guessing. As for the half-dream, it was – in its true form – an apparition of stray elements, and those elements – equal and not equal – that guided the way. The knowledge of the partners was forever dependent on the dream.

Thayouni, prince of Hydradahose, where august columns overpowered the caves, broke tradition. His loyal retinue – protectors of the far-reaching fields, guardians of the food supply and weapon stores – had come armed with the demand that his wife Anikamidas recount to them her half of the dream. They neighed. The female’s mane trembled under the veil cascading down her back. Her breasts, hidden under the golden net hanging pendulously from her neck to her chest, quivered. Her spotted body glittered with silk hair like an ostrich’s eyelashes. “Oh Hodahose prince, my husband, spokesman for the caves with three mountain passes, was it a vision that dictated to you to uncover the hidden within us – we, creatures of the most noble form?”

“What was it from my vision that dictated this demand to me? You, Hodahose princess, my wife, speaking from your sight – the most perfect sight from within the caves. I dictated the vision to myself, and I decided what I wanted from my vision. No dream will remain in the possession of only two, them alone, in this council after today,” determined Thayouni, his short, yellow velvet cloak spilling down from his shoulders to his back – the fused, continuous back of a centaur.

Anikamidas’ hands were sweating. As long as she told her husband the half that she had dreamt, he would in turn tell her the half that he had dreamt. That is if they both dreamt, they two, husband and wife, like the creatures of Hydradahose, and if they didn’t dream, they promised each other to wring out, with the hand of sleep, what they

were capable of squeezing out from the ripe grape bunches of night, forevermore, in every season. Her imagination stuttered a little with her voice, and her voice stuttered with the debris of the secret that was scattered in the assembly: “I saw you wounded without pain. You were telling a joke to the one who knows the ways of the mills, Hodahose Kidaroumi, as he ate a cucumber. You called out to him, twice after that, by the name Orsine,” said the princess. She let out a faint whinny and shook her black tail, its hair gleaming from sunflower oil.

“Strange, this,” said the prince as he chewed a pickled pumpkin flower. “The half that I have is happy. The one who knows the ways of the mills was with me. Yes. But he was counting on his fingers the emirates whose princes want to voluntarily enter into the law of Hydradahose, the law of submitting to embalming the dead rather than burning them. Burning increases the souls invading forbidden places: the mind; the structure that allows the princes to see the lost caves; women’s bedchambers.” He smiled wryly. “We don’t want companions intruding into our solitude.” He turned round to his wife. “The half of my dream was cheerful. No, maybe not cheerful in the manner that I would want. I was hoping that the princes of the stone boundaries would continue on in their stubbornness for a long time,” he neighed forcefully, causing those seated to touch the edges of the table. “Since our species has reached its peak in managing wars, we can no longer escape them. Wars are intellectual exercises that invite the soul to reconcile with worry. Between one war and another, there is an irreplaceable space – a time between one war and another – so that the mind can arrange itself in an arrangement that resembles the columns of Hydradahose: it not only supports the ceilings of our caves, but supports the missing circle of the fixed heavenly system. Between one war and another, the space forces us to think of a new war, a more perfect one. And these princes make me weary, my people,” he whinnied mutely. Those seated whinnied, the mighty centaurs that they were. “Where is Anistomis?” asked the prince as he scanned breadth of the table. “What did you say princess? That I was calling the one who knows the ways of the mills Orsine? Where is Anistomis to consider for me the meaning of this name?”

Anistomis’ Tablet

Like all Hydradahose creatures, Anistomis carried two daggers in tow; they hung down from two belts just below her armpits. She pulled out the right dagger from its

golden sheath with her left hand, and tapped its fine blade on a stone in the cave walls, which were covered with drawings. “This engraving requires restoration, Hodahose Sinou,” she said to the keyholder. He was second to her in the Fiflafidi administration – the library of Hydradahose.

* * *

The inherited knowledge in its entirety – all its features copied from the law of the night and the law of the day – was in Anistomis’ custody; a record of bulging sculptures or hollow ones, on boards with which they could be moved, and on the cave walls with winding cavities. Eight hundred green columns held up the ceiling, each column in the middle of an arc-shaped space with carpets for sitting and seats of graduated height facing the walls that visitors came to observe. Never-ending portrayals of forms sprawled across the stone to the ceiling: land creatures, water creatures, Hodahose creatures, some of them like images of the people from the closest place and the farthest, and some of them from a one-of-a-kind imagination – winged, or bird-headed, goat-headed, buffalo-headed and snake-headed. The writers recorded pictures and letters on plant leaves, and the sculptors were in charge of transferring it to stone under the supervision of Anistomis, the one with a sole horn sprouting from her forehead, a unicorn; Anistomis the sole survivor from the group of the Hodahose born with horns on their foreheads. Their lineage didn’t go back further than five generations, for they had fallen ill with ‘counterpart fever’. For everything, they had to find an equivalent: words, vowels, the four elements, the universe, names, creatures. They admitted that anything in existence, alive or inanimate, was not complete without the existence of another to make it twofold. Logic somewhat close to the logic of ‘the thing and its meaning’, but not exactly to that degree. It went further in managing the relationships between ‘the thing and its meaning’, like the eye and orbit, for example, or sleep and peacocks, or war and the womb. And when some of the issues of connection got trapped in the net of their imagination, they weren’t able to extract them – such as regret, necessity, measurement itself, the truth and colour. The fever was accompanied by an albinism that became worse in their bodies and spread gradually; the more it covered a limb, the more that limb withered. They named this strange albinism ‘counterpart fever’. While the name of the defect remained recorded in the pharmacists’ caves, the bodies of one-horned shrivelled up, and they were moved – embalmed as a result of the disease itself – to the canyons of Tayees, to settle their skeletons there, standing next to the skeletons of

Hydrahodahose mummified by the dry wind.

Anistomis was in her second year when she learnt that she was saved from those suffering from the white fever. The flour of the desiccating illness that blew in from the Strait of Worry didn't adhere to her silver skin. It was a coincidence that led her to the edge of the abyss, behind the sea of caves, where the stone heap was composed of column debris and tablets, the waste of restoration undertaken by decorators and builders between the caves' columns and walls in Hydrahodahose. She found the unique female creature, with a yellow horn on her forehead, on the remains of a fragmented tablet that had images of creatures – lines of indistinct writing. She returned with the remains to her father, whose equine half was rigid. Her father contemplated the letters, the pictures characteristic of his group, his race who never forgot, ever, anything they had heard or seen or read in the pages of stone. Every being from amongst them had a memory where details remained fresh in storage, never growing old. Thus the 'Council of Images' and the 'Authority of Reprimanding Bodies' entrusted Fiflafidi – the Hydrahodahose library – to them, one generation after the next, until succession fell on Anistomis – “serene as a shadow in the corner,” as they called her.

Her father whinnied faintly. He placed his hands on the two handles of his daggers as was customary of Hodahose deep in thought. “What are *these forms*, my serene daughter?” he asked coldly. His body was taken to the Tayees Canyon – the canyon of the torrid winds sweeping up from the Gulf of Sand. His daughter remained alone in her confusion. Then, a month before she began to manage Fiflafidi, her confusion became a ruse from the tricks of logic, because the pictures chiselled on the remains of the destroyed tablet were a repetition of a shape, which elicited the yearn to continue searching for meaning of counterpart. That's what Anistomis guessed. Forms whose upper halves - from heads to bellies - resembled the frontal appearance of Hodahose, but whose bottom halves were linked directly to two thighs, two legs and feet. Nothing else. Where were the horses' limbs in this combination? Naked, and upon them were short cloaks reaching their buttocks, and atop their heads crowns of fine hoops. They resembled one another without any difference. They were duplicates, each taken from a sole image in their engraver's imagination. And this in particular is what saved Anistomis from drowning, like creatures of her unique group, in the white abyss of the 'counterpart fever'. She had already undone the knot of managing the relationship between 'the thing' and 'its meaning': “Repetition is a

feature which separates the supposed links, making our bones dizzy by enticing them to some existential link with another being to establish it, and double it in order to be a possibility. These forms don't tell a tale; don't tell of a feat; they don't hope to draw a look to them to reveal that they were a complete creation or lacking in letters," said Anistomis with a logical tongue to the perturbed mind within her. She spoke for a while to herself, in a loud voice mixed with whinnies escaping from where letters are emitted, whenever she crossed the cornfields searching for the remaining bits of the unclear tablet. "I shall name him 'He who stands on two feet' like the cranes of the grassy plains. He who stands on two feet. Standing forever. Can he fold his limbs? Who came up with this tortuous form? He has no horns." She whinnied sorrowfully: "What was it that my people— people of the one horn sprouting from their forehead — did to themselves? The first-born descended to us from the womb of a common female Hodahose, who made peacock cages from reeds from the blue river Touman. The male, born after three years, married an ordinary female Hodahose who braided the tails of female Hodahose and decorated them with chains made from seashells harvested from the Touman River. The second newborn from our group was a female with a horn. She married a male Hodahose who made horseshoes for tailors and the scarlet-eyed decorators of the caves' columns. The female gave birth to a female with a horn in her forehead. The attractiveness of the strangeness waned from the depths of the Hodahose, and they came to consider the repetition of heads with horns rooted on their foreheads as the horns of goats. They stopped intermarrying with them, and so those of unicorn appearance only married amongst themselves. Each creature a descendant from the previous, inherited their ancestors' two daggers and their memory — a never-ending memory." Anistomis touched the handles of her two daggers, and let out a low whinny. "What did my small community do to itself? What lured them into the trap of finding a counterpart for everything? Did an image similar to the form of this being standing on two legs from the strange tablet cross one of their imaginations? Since I saw the carving of this being, I knew that I had been saved from the fever. Ah, my father, you who are upright and dry in the wind channel in Tayees Canyon, why did your vision return without seeing this tablet?"

With the corner of her short blue cloak, Anistomis wiped from her eye the sparkle of a tear peeking out from it as her imagination returned to the footpaths between the cornfields that she crossed as she returned with the tablet fragments to the house's stone cupboard. When Fiflafidi was placed in her care, the remains of the tablet were

deposited therein. Also, in one of the cave cupboards engraved in a column without inscriptions – one of the eight hundred green columns – was a circular door that Sinou would open to no one but Anistomis; he would open it on the ripeness of the moon, the fire of its complete cycle – the sculptor’s light cycle – or on an obscure date on which the female body cycle of Anistomis would coincide with the astronomical cycle, and she would become fearful, worried, full of the desire to cry without reason.

* * *

Anistomis drummed her dagger’s blade on the stone in the cave, “Hodahose Sinou, these inscriptions are being eaten away. I want someone to restore them. We readers of images only trust our eyes,” she said as she resumed wiping the corner of her left eye with the back of her hand while clutching the dagger.

Sinou let out a faint whinny. “I see a messenger at the door of the cave beckoning to me,” he said before deliberately walking to the cave door on his four hooves, which were lined with four copper horseshoes. He was away for a bit, then hurriedly returned. “The Hodahose prince is asking for you, Hodahose Anistomis, you, the organizer of the image system in Fiflafidi.”

Anistomis let out an obliging whinny, steady in the fading of its tone. She returned her dagger to its left sheath, still pointing with her finger to the inscriptions so that Sinou wouldn’t forget to restore them.

The above extract was translated by Sawad Hussain

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