





# FADLABI THE AIR AT NIGHT

29. MARCH - 2. JUNE 2019  
MUNCHMUSEET I BEVEGELSE  
- KUNSTHALL OSLO

To my kids

There be those who say that things  
and places have souls, and there be  
those who say they have not;  
I dare not say, myself.

H. P. LOVECRAFT <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Howard Phillips "H. P." Lovecraft (August 20, 1890 – March 15, 1937) was an American author of horror, fantasy and science fiction, especially the subgenre known as weird fiction. Lovecraft's guiding literary principle was what he termed "cosmicism" or "cosmic horror", the idea that life is incomprehensible to human minds and that the universe is fundamentally alien.



IF YOU COULD TOUCH THE AIR AT NIGHT in Khartoum, I think it would feel like hair. I mean, like my hair, more like wool than hair if you think of it as a European. I think it would feel like that, because I think the air would often get stuck on the branches of the old trees by the edge of the Nile. The current in the river is very strong, but the skin of the Nile is always calm. It doesn't ripple, it just shivers, as if deep down it wants to swirl and splash, but it's shy. The current though, is always strong. If somebody drowns in Omdurman, they might show up as far away as Omdoum. So many kilometres north.

MY GRANDMOTHER TOLD ME once that, to get to school from Fadlab to Atbra, my father crossed the Nile in a little boat every day at 5 a.m. and sold eggs, lemons and tomatoes, or whatever else, till it was time for school. That's how he made his allowance, she said. But my first memories of him are from England, where he was studying to become a surgeon.

I REMEMBER HIM pushing my stroller through the streets of London. He was a handsome, tall man. After we went back to Sudan, he joined the military and became wealthy. He was so well educated that he didn't even circumcise my sisters. His childhood peers from Fadlab were farmers and railway workers.

OUR STREET RAN DOWN to the River Nile, and on our street there were very many old stones, tiny old stones scattered all over. There were rusty cans, Neem trees, puddles of washing water, and slender dogs, very lazy slender dogs. There was a mad man called Mohammed holding a book and writing words in English with charcoal on walls. There were airplanes crossing the sky, cars, girls, beautiful girls, boys leaning on electricity poles, birds, goats, hens, cats, old men sitting out in front of their houses, and a very bright sun. The street started at the gas station owned by Mr Benda, it ran past the Officer's Club and it ended at Awad Al-Jeed's grocery store, beside the river.

THE STREET HAD NO NAME. Most of them don't. They don't need names, since we know them all too well. Our house was the third on the left if you were heading towards the Nile. It was a "half house". It was built as one big house and then divided with a wall in the middle to fit two families, ours and Uncle Merghani and Aunt Amira's family. When you're a child in Sudan all grownups are your uncles and aunts.

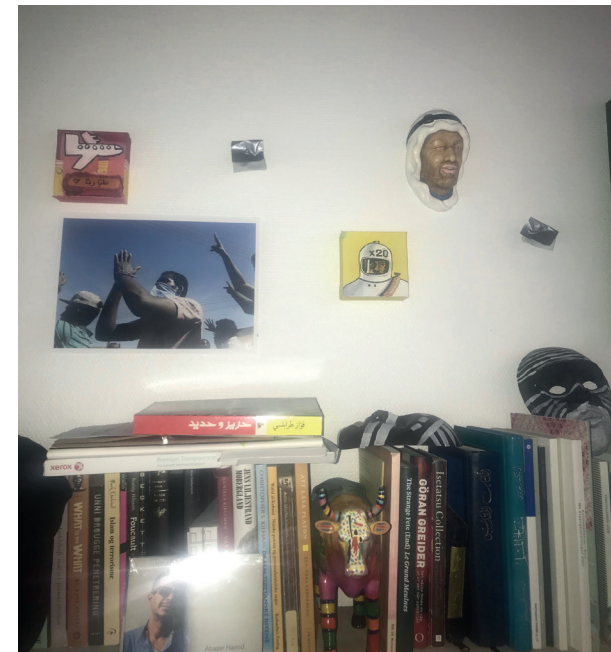
SARAH, MY YOUNGER SISTER, was a tiny creature with few teeth. She lost them to sugar like all Sudanese kids. I had mine pulled out when I was six because they were so rotten. Sarah was my best friend among my five siblings, but I am close to them all, for different reasons. Not Abeer though. Abeer is the most strict. She is two years older than me. We were always competing when we were young, and she always won. My teeth didn't grow back until I was eleven. Everybody called me "sharoam" because of that. It's a childish insult for those with no teeth. "Sharoam sharoam... kaddad addoam!" they shouted when they saw me. But it didn't bother me. I thought it was cool to have a nickname.

EVERY RAMADAN the Egyptians produced a new TV series about the same topic: how the Muslims won. How they defeated the Persians and Rome. I remember wearing an aluminium salad bowl as a helmet. The bigger kids forced us to play the infidels and they were the Muslim heroes, but they couldn't agree on who should be Khalid Ibn Alwaleed, so we had three Khalids. Some of the kids made serious bows and arrows. They made them so sharp. My friend Osama lost his eye to one of those, the arrow went straight into his eye and we panicked. He didn't lose the eye completely, it was still there. But it looked weird, grey and useless.



I STARTED AT MILITARY SCHOOL when I was 15 and studied there for three years. The school was founded in the early eighties by Jaafar Nimeiry, the dictator who ruled Sudan from 1969 till 1985. He thought it was a really good idea for smart young men to learn the arts of war. He was so certain that all leaders are army people. The school accepted only the best. Only those with the best grades from each region got to join the school. I think that was the best time of my life.

I BELIEVE I AM WHO I AM today mostly because of those three years. I learned a lot while learning the army ways. We learned science, languages, geography. We learned about the AK-47, and I had my first lessons in painting.



MY TEACHER WAS A SLIM, very black gay man named Ismat. “It is possible to have two vanishing points,” he told me once. He would shout: “Perspective, perspective boys!” I really liked Ismat. I didn’t like gay people back then, but him, I liked. I told myself, he’s probably not gay anyway. At the boarding school, some boys had sex with other boys, but if you didn’t take it in the ass, you were not gay. It was totally OK to fuck other boys, just be a man and don’t let no one fuck you.

I THOUGHT OF MY TEACHER when I had my first painting exhibition in Norway, while I was being held at the asylum-seekers detention centre. I titled it *Only for refugees*. But some people from the management came, and they were the ones who bought paintings.

WHEN I WAS SIXTEEN, I asked my teacher:

“Is Allah the only god?”

“Yes! You know, in the Quran there is the word ‘Ahad’. Do you know what it means?”

“No!”

“‘Wahid’ means one, right?”

“Yeah...”

“‘Ahad’ is also ‘wahid’, but it’s an absolute one. It’s a one that you can’t divide. Indivisible. That is Allah!”

I thought a bit before asking again:

“But Allah is all powerful, right, he can do anything?”

“Yes!” my teacher said.

“If he can do anything, then he could make another Allah. But if he could do that, then he would not be indivisible.”

MY TEACHER told me to stop listening to the communists in my neighbourhood. I didn’t know any, but I just nodded and said nothing.

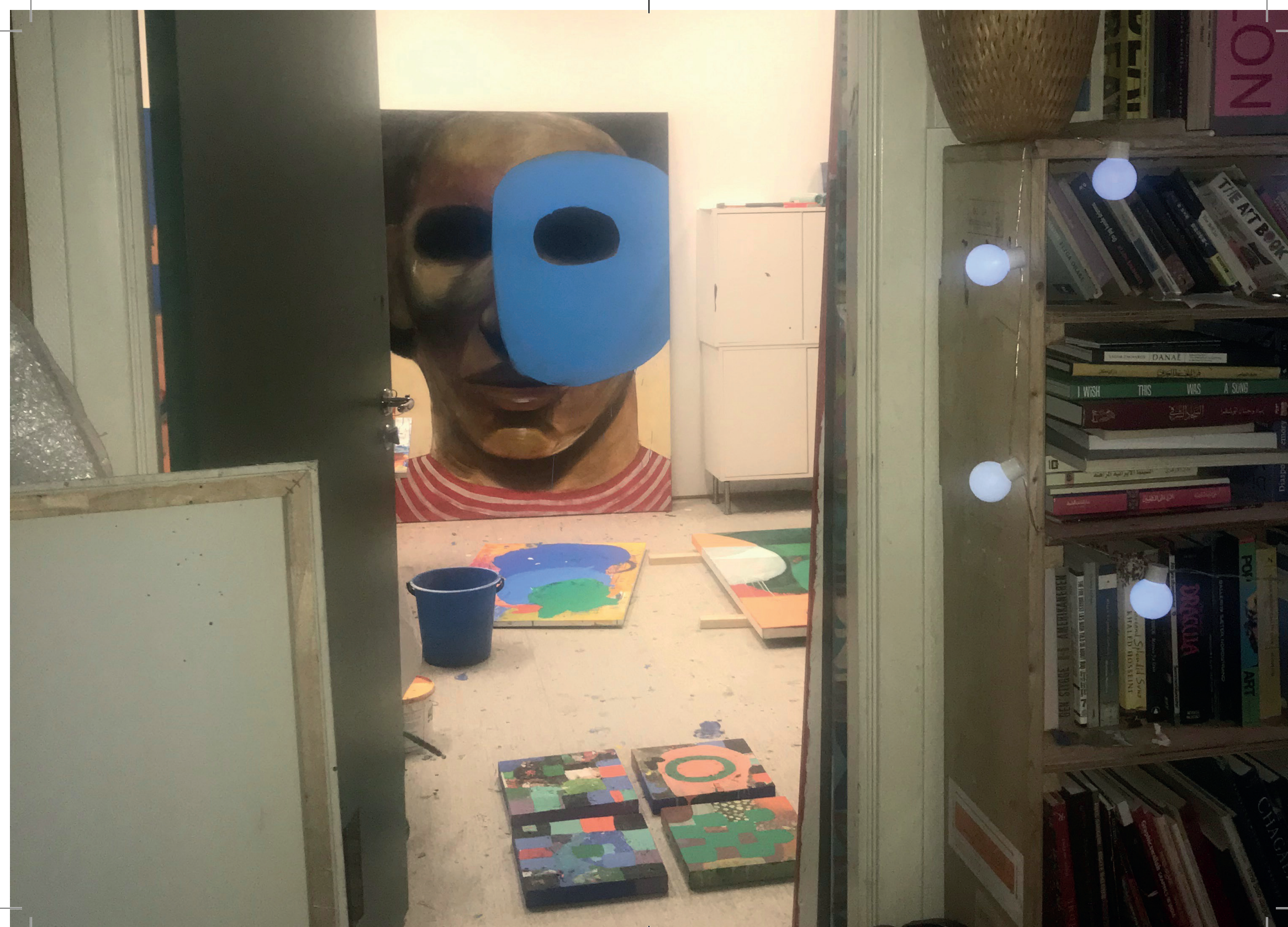


MY FATHER'S FATHER was a merchant who owned slaves from southern Sudan. He used to travel and trade between the north and the south. Actually, I don't know if he had any slaves, but he had three wives for sure. I only remember meeting him once, on his death bed at the hospital. I remember my father asking me, in a very polite voice, to go shake his hand. He was so old and weak. When I try to recall his face, a blurry image comes to mind, but I can't remember his features.

DAD WAS SO PROUD of being the man he became, but he was hard on me, because he thought I was spoiled, which was true. I was driven to school by a chauffeur, I never washed my own clothes, and he bought me "whatever I wanted".









MY FATHER NAMED ME Muhammad Ali because as a Muslim, your first born boy should be named Muhammad, like the prophet. It means He who is thanked in Heaven and on Earth. Dad used to say: The best of names are the thankful ones or the worshipping ones. Like Abdullah or Abdulkadir. It means the slave of Allah and the slave of He who is all powerful.

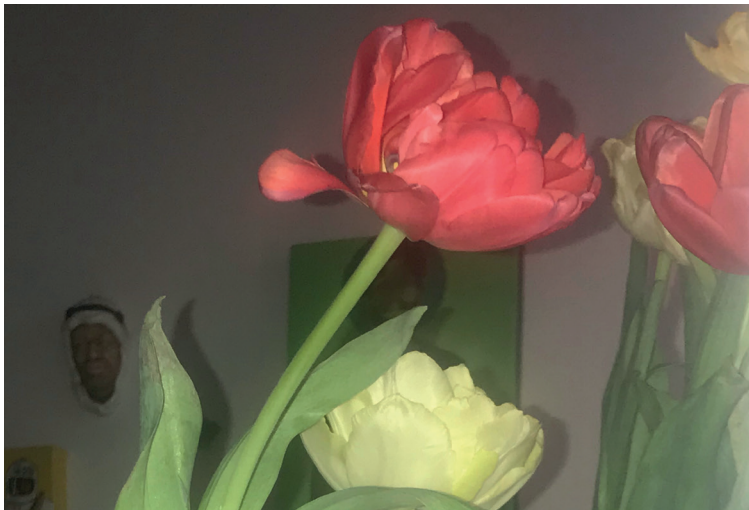
GOD HAS NINETY-NINE NAMES in Islam. They all mean something. Al-Rahman means the merciful. The absolutely merciful. Everything in the whole universe is incomplete and imperfect. Except God! Nobody is absolutely merciful, but Allah is.



I STARTED QUITTING ISLAM when I was seventeen. I read a small book in Arabic titled "Introduction to the philosophy of values. Goodness, truth and beauty." I started quitting then, and I am still doing it, because it's really hard. I tried many things to wash myself totally clean from my Muslim-ness. Once, after I came to Norway, I even let my friend Trygve baptise me at Akerselva. He shouted: "Who's your Lord and Saviour?" But it didn't work. I didn't know what to say.

I WAS LIVING IN NORWAY, living a precarious existence and sleeping in my studio in an old factory, when I found out that my father had died. Carlton, my neighbour, knocked on my door and told me that my family had been trying to reach me. He looked at me, looked at the floor and then he told me. I didn't know how to react. Neither did Carlton. I asked him to come in, sit down and then I put on a movie. I still don't know why I did that.

I DIDN'T HAVE A Norwegian passport then so I wasn't able to fly home to comfort my mother. I felt so helpless. Dad wasn't old. He never drank or smoked. There seemed to be no reason to it. I think it was then that I was defeated by depression for the first time.



I'D ALWAYS BEEN SURROUNDED by depression, but it was just a ghost, a cloud. I knew it was there, but it didn't bother me. That day though, it grabbed my soul by the collar and shook it. It pressed its face so close to mine, breathing its stinking alcohol breath onto my face. After that, I always found a reason to let it in.





WHEN I'M DEPRESSED, I spend many hours watching things on Youtube. I find something, a word, a name, a genre or whatever and search for everything about it. I watch it with my headset on, I turn the volume up loud and pretend to care about what I am watching, until I forget my surroundings.

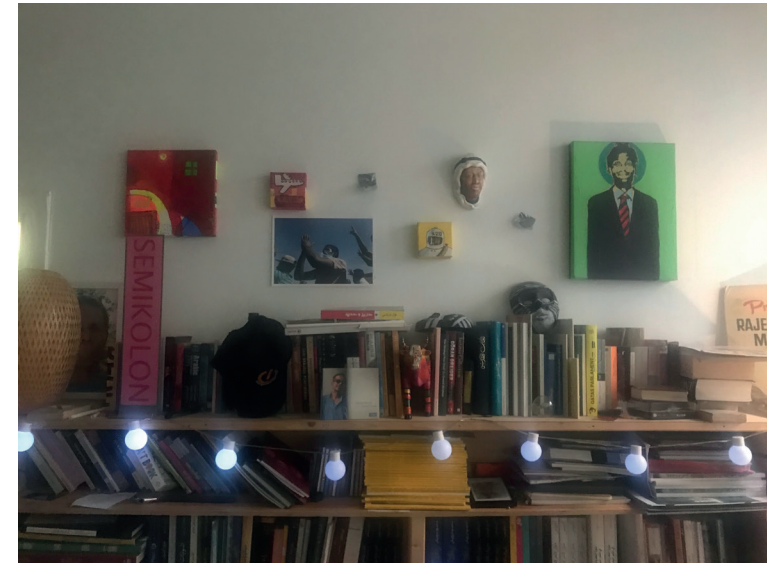


THAT'S HOW I FOUND PHIL WANG. I am sure he would be very happy to know that some Sudanese guy watched all his videos on Youtube. I know in which ones he repeats the same joke. Which catchphrase he chooses, hoping it will one day be famous, with the audience finishing it when he starts: "Hey! It's me Phil! Phil Wang! Phil..." I guess the future audience would shout then: "WANG!"

I really like Phil. He plays with racial stereotypes very well. He would say the most racist thing about himself as if it is a fact and leave the audience hanging somewhere between their embarrassment for being sort of caught for their racism and laughing at how funny actually the joke was. I wonder how he would feel about his big portrait in my exhibition. Because it's actually not a portrait of Phil, it's an illustration of my depression. I would've completely freaked out if I was him. Please don't hate me Phil, I actually like you very much.

WHEN I FINISHED HIGH SCHOOL, the civil war between the north and south was getting worse, and the Muslim Brotherhood had taken over the country in a military coup. The south had rebelled against the north, demanding justice and equal distribution of wealth, but the new rulers turned the conflict into a Jihad war. They thought that if they fought hard enough, they would win.

THEY DECREED that all high school students should go through a year of military service, or else they won't be allowed to continue their studies. No military service meant no high school diplomas and no university.

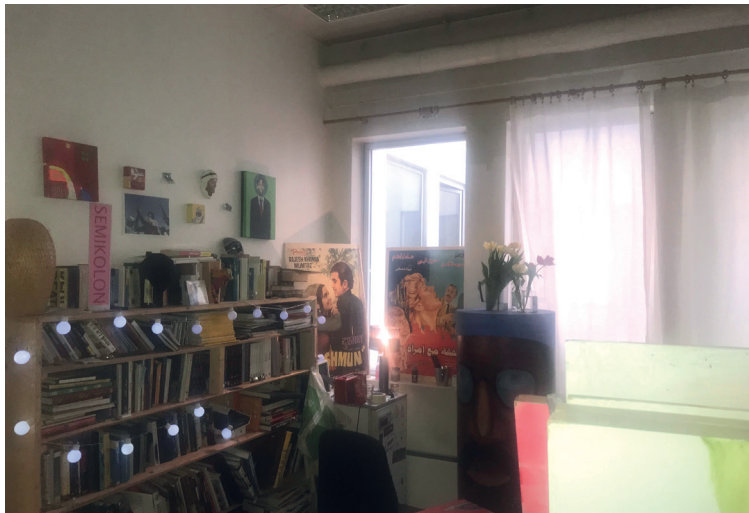


SINCE IT WAS SUDAN, of course, the children of the rich and the middle classes were able to escape the war, but the government kept sending poor marginalised northern kids to fight poor marginalised southerners, after only 45 days of “military training”. It was a stupid war and, though neither of them have the courage to admit it, both sides lost.



BY THE TIME I WAS TWENTY-ONE I was able to make money selling art. I used to paint tourist paintings and sell them to NGO workers. I would make the paintings small enough to fit into their suitcases. Sometimes I taught painting classes to middle-aged white women who had come to Africa to find themselves.

DAD SAID TO ME, “Son, I am a doctor. People come to me sick and I try to heal them. What do you do with this art thing?”



MY FATHER WAS SUCH A PROUD MAN, maybe it's better that he died before getting old. He wasn't scared of death. He was very religious and he did everything the right way. He was ready for his journey to heaven. But I thought my mother was going to die first. Before I left and journeyed to Europe she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She travelled to Saudi Arabia with my father. Hospitals are better there. When they called home, I avoided talking to them. I didn't know what to say. When Mom came back without her breast, she cried while asking me: “Why didn't you talk to me to make sure I was OK? Don't you care at all?”



I AM ALWAYS DEPRESSED NOW, but I am really good at hiding it. I am so good that some people tell me that I inspire them and fill them with hope when they see me. But the truth is that inside I feel that everything I once tried to reach, touch or embrace, is poisoned. Life is a trap. It's an endless loop and none of us matters. Anyone would do! Even as I write this, I'm depressed. I'm scared. I can't even love anymore. No, that's not true. I feel love. But I can't love the way I should.



I WAS WALKING HOME along a street with no name, a street that ran down to the River Nile, when the secret police came and took me. I was prepared of course. I expected it, by then. I'd spent the week before reading a book by a Saudi communist talking about his time in jail. I mean, a Saudi communist. What could be worse than that? And when you're grabbed by the secret police, it's always the same thing. They come in a car that has shaded windows, or in a Toyota pickup if they're planning to arrest a few at once. Once they have forced you into the car, they beat the shit out of you while shouting insults, abuse mixed with stuff that doesn't make any sense. Your head is facing down and they hold you down and take you to a place we'd all heard of, a place we called the ghost house. We didn't know so much about it but still I'd heard enough that I thought I knew what to expect and I thought I was ready. I thought I was ready, but as it turned out I wasn't. Nobody could be.

BUT I AM NOT GOING to tell you everything. So much happened before these things I have told you about, and so much more after. Some things I couldn't explain to you even if I tried, and some I don't want to tell you even if I could.



THERE IS ONE MORE THING, THOUGH. At night in Khartoum, when you stare at the sky, it stares back into you. It opens within you a tiny private Nile. It turns you into a tiny, shivering star, lost in the night's dark ink. No night anywhere is better than a Khartoum night. And sometimes in the night there is this feeling I can't describe. It's of pure joy and warmth. So pure, as if my heart is only filled with goodness. As if I could hug somebody. So short, like a glitch. When my dad used to hold my head with the palm of his hand and whisper some verses from the Quran, that glitch echoed within my soul stretching longer and longer before leaving my body through the goosebumps. I never felt more safe.

I THINK THAT'S WHY it took me this long to quit being a Muslim. Three years ago I changed my name from Muhammad Ali to Cassius, after Cassius Clay. That night I dreamt I was in a boxing ring, being beaten, while my father watched. It turns out I don't really use the name Cassius. Everybody just calls me Fadlabi.



#### MUNCHMUSEET ON THE MOVE- KUNSTHALL OSLO

As part of the Munch Museum programme, Kunsthall Oslo is producing twelve exhibitions based around the Rolf Stenersen Collection, which was donated to the city of Oslo in 1936. The series includes monographic and thematic historical exhibitions, as well as contemporary curatorial projects and solo shows by younger artists. Munchmuseet on the Move – Kunsthall Oslo is at Dronning Eufemias gate 34 and runs until 2020, when the Stenersen Collection becomes part of the new Munch Museum in Bjørvika. Kunsthall Oslo continues to present its programme of international contemporary art in the space at Rostockgata 2.

Grafisk design/Graphic design: Lukas Lehner



KULTURRÅDET  
Arts Council  
Norway



City of Oslo





