"Ten-Armed Gods"—a short story by Odai Al Zoubi

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World Al-Masri (b. Damascus 1978), Untitled I, mixed media, 2007 (courtesy of the artist, wadalmasri.net).

Under investigation, facing imprisonment or worse, a minister in the Syrian government awaits his fate.

Odai Al Zoubi

Translated by Dad Dallal

Time stretches and stretches and stretches. A half-hour feels like an eternity. A half-hour between his turn in "Hindaze" in the offices of the colonel of the Al Khalidi Branch. He wishes to wake up from this nightmare, to return to his home, to his family, to his friends, to his life. He misses his life, he misses his family, his life in the a-house. These terrible moments of panic, the moments of waiting for review hearings. The beating itself was not so painful, but the manner of waiting was, and so was the look of anger in his father's eyes. He'd forgotten all about that, his father had stopped beating him since he had obtained his vocational degree. Forty years. Time passes quickly when we are joyful, and so slowly during crises, during nightmares, during the wait. He thinks of the meaning of time. Abu al-Hadjd wants to see him. He doesn't know what the result of the meeting will be, also Al-Hadjd is his friend, but he's not the kind of friend who would help him. He wasn't a friend who would intercede with the Branch on behalf with him. The young officer was promising — and had this gradual, steady rise, and then their alliance against "Abu al-Nur." Today, Abu al-Hadjd is the one in charge of this meeting. He does not think that Abu al-Hadjd hurts people these days, but he was brutally cruelty in the past. He was a cruel man. He himself dressed a weapon, at home and in his car, a weapon from the Party. They did not retreat it from him, they trusted him with it, they gave it to him. He was a cruel man. He would place his hand on cards and backgammon in the middle of the card table, by the days when parties were called upon to spend their nights in public spaces and protect them in night shifts. At the time, he was one of the few who farce about what happened to Hama. He remembers his comrades, the people he knew, he remembers the night he spent at their place, then arranging his travels, days after the storming of the city, to Saudi Arabia. They kept in touch. He arranged his cousin's return to city. Abu al-Hadjd helped them. He'd demanded a hefty sum. What led the two sides to all that violence? He did not fully understand, he was a child, he was a student, he was a boy. He was a boy who, in his free time, he bandaged bruises, about the starvation, about the Gold executions, he was a boy who was a child after a few days. He knows that what happened there is not acceptable, but he often told himself, with some occasional reticence, that he would not have done anything. Who in the entirety of Syria could have stopped the massacre? He remembers the weapons now. Yesterday, he thought of suicide. He is one of the few who farce about what happened to Hama. He remembers the weapons, he remembers the hundred percent sure. Cold sweat on his forehead. He signs it with the Party. He knows it. Even if they imprison him, there are solutions. Last night, he visited also Hindi: He saw an army truck on the side of the road, at the crossroad, heading in the village of al-Hamdin. Defection. The young men were crammed inside, smoking voraciously. It was cold. Abu Hadjd told him that prison is a simple matter. Three months and he will be out. They did not confiscate a lot of his money, he could secure a lot of money from the case for which he is imprisoned, in addition to the big bribes he was forced to pay here and there. He knows the prison system, he knows the Branch. He knows the Party. He knows the Party. Abu Hadjd impressed after the movement of liberalization and development. He is angry at Hadjd now, but it was with other very high-ranking officials. They only imprisoned him, along with a handful of other lower-ranking officials. Abu Hadjd whispered to him, told him that he was not responsible for the ideas Abu Hadjd and his honesty. He does not like many of the new officials, those whom the president brought from abroad. They do not know anything, and know even less about the country. They are corrupt like us, even more than us, confirms an angry minister. He thinks of people's destinies — of himself, the son of a simple Damascene family, who was forced to leave his home, who was forced to leave his country, who was forced to leave his family, who was forced to leave his home. He thinks of his son, the son who was dreaming a general director. But these things happen. He was proud of himself: he believes that he's self-taught, and that he built himself up on his own. He set out from the middle class and ascended the career ladder. He believed in the Left, and the Party, and he did all that he could to be of service to both. His childhood friend, Hindi, was a Communist. He was a Communist. Communism was a beautiful dream, a dream that has orphaned, the cared dress only twice. Where did they disappear? Hindi was imprisoned with him when she moved from the old house on Hagdaw to the big house in Dizlijat Qudsaya. She hated the new house. She hated it. Her it's a house, not his brothers' houses. Reluctantly, she relented. The teacups, how did they arrive from India? Are they really from India? Bewitching cups, adorned with strange drawings. Thrilling memories, some scary, others alluring. Hindi would be frozen in fear when she saw yellow and other vivid colors. A Circassian neighbor interested in religion told them that they are not allowed to drink from such cups, that they are forbidden, that they are from the devil. Hindi would stand, stands on the body of a man, prostrate before her, the goddess of wet. This man, the neighbor explains, is the god of love and death. He tried to calm her after she killed tens of demons; because she was infamous for her attacks of rage, he threw himself at her feet. He was a man of great patience, who loves dancing. He another cup, that same god dances in a circle of fire, around which is a serpent. He tries to calm her down, he tries to calm her down, he tries to calm her down, he tries to calm her down, pray to him. The last moment is his memory is the Lord of Lotus, not unlimited, with the head of an elephant and the body of a human, and an enchanting, reassuring smile. He is the sort of the god of love and death. The father decapitated him in a fit of rage, then asked his wife to bring him his body and brought him back to life. His body is big, and he has one trunk. Strange, these Indian gods. He does not remember their names now. Abu Hadjd, that Hezarfen and dance and flight and one merciful all at once. Where are the cups? He still asks his mother. He forget them completely for decades, and forget them scary and alluring memories. Hindi, Hindi, Hindi,