correspondents at large
BENGHAZI

Dispatches from Benghazi

KHALED MATTAWA

SINCE THE YEAR 2000 I HAVE SPENT MOST OF MY SUMMERS IN BENGHAZI, LIBYA, THE CITY OF MY BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD. I HAVE BEEN able to return for the past six years, after an absence of twenty-one. At first I anticipated disorientation. The two decades that I'd lived in the United States saw extreme forms of oppression in Libya, as well as hostility between Libya and the West, which by 2003 was coming to an end. Yet little surprised me about my city when I returned. I had expected the buildings to appear smaller than I'd remembered, the streets to seem shorter and narrower, and, given how the Qaddafi regime had mismanaged the country, everything to be shabbier.

All proved true. Some of the cars that were new when I left now trudged the roads on treadless wobbly tires and with unhinged rusty fenders flapping like the wings of birds that had lost the gift of flight. Elegant relatives and family friends now wore old tattered clothes and sandals kept together with rough thread or steel wire. I can't count the number of beautiful women I'd admired in my adolescence who had lost some, and sometimes all, of their teeth because of diabetes. Piles of rubbish appeared with equal frequency in rich and poor neighborhoods. Our old street lay asphaltless, with more potholes than road. Several times I came across electric poles with phone lines wound up above them like giant hair balls suspended in the air. The center of the city, where my father owned a store, showed none of the vibrancy I remembered. The stores were half empty, the pace of trade was slow, and the whole place stood like a ghost town at sundown. I had known that this deterioration was happening in my absence, had seen the beginning of the downturn when I left. My preemptive visualization of the city's decay proved powerful. Nothing astonished or surprised me; it only saddened me, something for which I had prepared myself.

Reestablishing myself in Benghazi began with assuming family responsibilities and evolved into getting to know the city's people. If Benghazi still resounds with the word *home* to me now, friendships with some of the city's writers, artists, and academics account

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for much of that sense of belonging. I began to read and view their work and to appreciate the enormous challenges they face in creating a literary and civic culture. I had not anticipated the degree of their dedication to the city they celebrate and endure and was consoled by their sober, even somber, optimism. In due time I too began to take account of what surrounded me. Written over the past three years, these dispatches from Benghazi are part of my attempt to chronicle the life and times of my home city, wellspring of my exile.

30 June 2003

I have just finished reading Ahmad al-Faituri's new novel, *Sereeb* (a colloquial phrase that means an endless, meandering tale). This fevered narrative alternates between a young protagonist and his grandmother and moves in and out of reality, history, and myth, from the character Nuss Enssaiss (whose name means "halfy half") of the local folktale to Berenice, daughter of Magas of Cyrene, after whom Benghazi was once named, to episodes of the protagonist's father's shenanigans with a neighbor lady. A port city surrounded by salty marshes, Benghazi was inhabited and abandoned several times since its inception in the third century BC. Al-Faituri's book attempts to create a sense of cohesion between the postcolonial Benghazi of his birth and the Greek colony where the Garden of Hesperides was reputed to have been. Much in the city still evokes this reach for the ancient, such as the Greek ruins found regularly. And while these discoveries are a source of pride for the city's establishment, the city's folk and literary cultures are almost strictly Arabophone now. As such, al-Faituri's temporal weaving strains under the weight of a pronounced cultural project, but it's still a fascinating read.

Muhammad al-Mufti takes a steadier approach in his *Hadraza fi Benghazi*. He too titles his book with a colloquial term, *hadraza*, and the title translates as "chatting of/about/in Benghazi." Beginning with the postwar period, when Benghazi lay in ruins after being exchanged several times between Axis and Allied armies, al-Mufti merges autobiography and history to portray the city at the onset of independence, in 1951. He recalls the pre-oil poverty and the heavy presence of the United Nations. His description of active cultural life, led by the Omar al-Mukhtar Society, the city's first civic organization after the end of Italian colonization, can only evoke deep nostalgia among the country's intellectuals, suffering under the cynicism of the Qaddafi regime. In one vivid episode he describes the city's response to a persistent drought. Following Muslim ritual, the city's citizens wore their clothes backward, marched to an open field, and prayed for rain. He also tells us about the city's writers volunteering to teach in a citywide literacy campaign.

When I met al-Mufti two years ago, he asked me if I knew of a "James Ngugi." It turns out al-Mufti was a classmate of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o at Leeds University in the 1960s, where they both edited a small literary journal. I told him I'd love to read anything he'd written about that time. "Oh, that will have to wait. I have so many things to get to before that," he said in a fine BBC accent. Al-Faituri and al-Mufti are former political prisoners intent on contributing to Libyan culture by writing unrepresented history. Al-Mufti was the country's first heart surgeon and al-Faituri one of its best young literary critics and journalists at the time of their imprisonment in the 1970s. The Qaddafi regime opposes any neutral, let alone positive, narratives of Libya before the colonel's revolution and has vociferously portrayed the period of 1943–69 as a time of opportunism and servility to imperialists. Al-Faituri and al-Mufti subtly suggest otherwise, and the regime was none too happy about their efforts. Published in Egypt, al-Faituri's *Sereeb* is being distributed here only by the author and his friends. Al-Mufti's book was officially banned, though it's still on sale openly in Benghazi's two real bookstores.

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The Qaddafi regime considers Omar al-Mukhtar, the leader of anti-Italian resistance in the 1920s and 1930s, the country's national hero, but it is uncertain about what to do with him and has given the old man no rest. In 1976 Qaddafi decided to remove the great mujahid's remains from his elegant mausoleum in Benghazi and to inter them near the place where the Italians hanged him. A few months ago, the empty mausoleum, which still appears on the nation's currency, was bulldozed in the middle of the night, without a word of explanation. In their books, al-Faituri and al-Mufti reminisce about the mausoleum as an important geographic marker in the city. Postcards of the building are still on sale. I have walked into several shops where the mandatory picture of Qaddafi sits beside a newly framed photo of the mausoleum.

Tonight my two teenage nephews stopped by my mother's house to see us and to chat. One of them is awaiting his final-exam results, and we talked about his exams. Everybody is an expert at *hjabat* ("amulets"), or cheat capsules, I was told. A photographers' shop with a sign that says "Discounts for Students" means *hjabat* are on sale. They are available for all subjects at all educational levels. But using *hjabat* is not the only way to cheat. Students often try to talk a teacher into letting them cheat. If they ask a teacher to give them a ride after the exam or offer a teacher one, it suggests payments will be made in the car. My nephews think women teachers are easy when it comes to cheating. "*Ya abla* ["Lady Teacher"], you must be tired and want to go home to cook your supper, no?" Women teachers do not take bribes from boy students or students' fathers, but gifts from girl students and students' mothers are acceptable.

22 July 2003

A few people were at M's "chalet" when a friend and I arrived there. Beach-house compounds like this one go on all the way to Sidi Bufakhra, forty kilometers from the center of the city. Made up of badly built two-bedroom apartments, each has a big front veranda where the socializing is done. The beach has the usual problems with garbage disposal, cheese wrappers and watermelon rinds littering the golden sand.

A Tunisian professor is visiting to research the intellectual history of Benghazi, and our gathering tonight was in his honor. Two university professors, a physician, a businessman, and two writer-translators joined us. The conversation, full of the city's history, turned to a discussion of Khadija al-Jahmi, a renowned educator who'd just passed away. Was she a single phenomenon or part of a pattern of liberated, educated women? Those who argued that she was part of a movement could not name many other women like her.

I knew al-Jahmi as the headmistress of my cousin's school. I saw her once helping groups of girls cross the street and leading them into the school. I remember being impressed that such an important woman would do such a humble thing. Before she turned to education, al-Jahmi presented programs on the radio in the 1950s, often reading her vernacular poems that commented on local affairs. I listen to radio presenters here, and it's a sham. A young woman announcer repeatedly used the terms "the Vitaminese people" and "the Vitaminese prime minister" and reported how the Great Leader expressed his admiration of "the Vitaminese struggle against imperialism." Al-Jahmi was irreplaceable, the men at our table agreed.

Though conversation went in every possible direction and called everything by its name, sometimes a speaker would lower his voice when saying something dangerous. I caught one of the writers trying to detect if a neighbor was eavesdropping. Sometimes a person would leave and return later when the talk had become safer. He did not say anything, and no one commented on his departure. A certain fear lingers, a residue of much harder

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times, but the people I'm talking about, mostly former political prisoners, weren't going to be shaken off every time a breeze blew past.

The conversation was aided by a few bottles of local moonshine. Nuts and melon were brought out. There was supposed to be a *makaroona embakbaka* (a kind of *pasta arabiatta*) made by one of the college professors, but it still had not arrived by midnight. It's taken a long time for a good evening like this to take place, and I'm glad it did.

14 July 2004

Al-Ahly Benghazi Club is to be reinstituted, announced el-Saadi Qaddafi, the colonel's third-eldest son. He made the announcement two weeks ago to thousands of the club's jubilant fans at a rally in the city's sports arena. Wearing an expensive white suit and an egg-yolk yellow silk T-shirt, el-Saadi, who goes by the honorary title Engineer Pasha, made a brief and rather bumbling statement. "The reinstitution of al-Ahly was undertaken with direction from the Leader of the Revolution," he said, never mentioning why the club was closed down in the first place.

The "delicensing" of al-Ahly Benghazi occurred after a badly officiated match in 2000 in which al-Ahly lost to a club supported by el-Saadi. Al-Ahly Benghazi fans rioted, burned cars, and, most egregiously, called out abuses against el-Saadi and his mother. The following day bulldozers arrived at the site of the al-Ahly club and leveled it. National media did not report the event.

Al-Ahly is a reincarnation of the Omar al-Mukhtar Society, which was started in Benghazi in 1943. The British administration of the Barce region (eastern Libya) granted a group of Benghazi leading figures license to start a sports, social, and cultural organization. The society's events included poetry recitations, boxing and track contests, a literacy program, a campaign to support the Palestinian cause, and a boy scout troop. The society also published a journal called *Barce al-riyadhia* ("Barce Sports"). From the outset the society's activities had a political dimension. Led by a mix of older, established leaders and young activists, the society became a forum for pro-independence activism. *Barce al-riyadhia*, later renamed *Al-watan* ("The Nation"), published scathing criticism of the British administration of the country. Loyal to Prince Idris, a national figure who later became the country's constitutional monarch, the society agitated for immediate independence. Using Arab nationalist rhetoric, the society presented itself as a loyal opposition to the king, urging him to refuse weak terms for independence. In April 1951 the society organized an anti-British protest in Benghazi that turned into a riot. A British magistrate's decision resulted in one-year prison sentences for the society's top three officers and the dissolution of the organization. Even when Libya gained independence a few months later, the society's license was not renewed. In 1952 the society's sports units were reorganized and renamed al-Ahly Benghazi Cultural, Social, and Sports Club. King Idris, who feared political parties, inducted several of the society's members into the House of Lords. Other members ran for the House of Representatives, where they continued to agitate for Arab nationalist causes.

Historically allied with the Omar al-Mukhtar Society, al-Ahly, in the Qaddafi era, continued to symbolize independent civic society. With a few bows to the regime, such as sending telegrams congratulating the Great Leader on his major achievements, al-Ahly continued to operate with minimal interference. Like other football clubs, it provided an area where the public could show loyalty to something other than the regime. Otherwise football had little political significance—that is, until the emergence of el-Saadi. He began as a midfielder for al-Ahly Tripoli, and the club, already powerful, won every championship. El-Saadi served also as vice president of

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the Libyan Football Federation and captain of the national team. A few years ago, sports announcers commented on football matches in the following manner: "Player number seven passes to player number eight. Player number eight chips the ball to player number nine. Player number nine passes to Engineer-Pasha Saadi el-Qaddafi, genius of Libyan football. Engineer-Pasha Saadi passes the ball to player number five." The young unemployed and the mostly prospectless teenage fans resisted el-Saadi's intrusion in football. The matches in which he played began to have a riotous quality, especially since the players from the opposing teams offered him no resistance. During a match in 1999 in Tripoli, a group of el-Saadi's guards attacked the crowd with machine guns and killed several people. A year later the al-Ahly Benghazi fracas occurred, increasing the hostility toward el-Saadi even among the fans of al-Ahly Tripoli. During matches after the American occupation of Iraq, crowds chanted, "Way, way, way, you'll end up like Udai," referring to the elder son of Saddam Hussein, who was killed last June.

After the reinstitution of al-Ahly Benghazi, leaders of the club and other prominent figures have appealed on behalf of the young men who were arrested for rioting. A court had sentenced three of them to death but later commuted the penalty to life in prison. The regime's decision to relicense al-Ahly has not addressed the prisoners' case. It is still not clear where the club will be situated, nor is it known how and when the club's demolished buildings will be rebuilt.

31 July 2004

I've just returned after a short trip to Cairo and found the literary scene here abuzz with a nasty recent development. At a coffee house, I ask a friend for details, and he hands me a copy of *Al-mashhad al thaqqafi*, the tabloid issued by the Union of Libyan Writers. On page 3 I read an article titled "Decree Issued by the Secretariat of the People's General Congress: Regarding the Conditions and Stipulations on Membership to the Union." The article does not mention that the union had been disbanded a few weeks earlier. The new conditions for membership in the union require that "[t]he applicant must be committed to the system of the people's rule and devoted to the principles and aims of the Great Fateh Revolution." Therefore, "[t]he applicant must submit a signed document in which he commits himself to adherence to the Third Universal Theory and the masses' system of governance based on the people's authority." The "Great Fateh Revolution" is the 1969 coup that brought Qaddafi to power. The "Third Universal Theory" is Qaddafi's social, economic, and political philosophy as elucidated in his *Green Book*. The "people's rule" is the term used for the regime's way of running the country. Writers who wish to belong to the union must therefore demonstrate past allegiance to the official ideology or promise future allegiance: "The applicant therefore must submit a certificate of criminal status showing that he has not been charged with a felony or misdemeanor regarding the stability and security of the rule of the masses." The 1970s purges that landed most of the country's writers in jail ended in 1988 with a general amnesty. Since then, imprisoned journalists and bureaucrats who had been in the employ of the government reassumed their posts. A number of them continued contributing to national publications, albeit with well-honed self-censorship, understandable given that the country bans nongovernmental publishing. Most returned as members of the union, and some were elected as officers.

The new membership regulations of the writers' union show characteristic signs that Qaddafi's old guard, the Revolutionary Committees, is contending for influence over the country's direction. Seif, Qaddafi's second-oldest son, assisted by liberal technocrats, has increasingly become the Revolutionary Com-

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mittees' main adversary and has influenced his father's decision making on economic issues. Yet even as Qaddafi attempts to distance himself from the Revolutionary Committees, he needs them to run his security sectors and media outlets. By having the Revolutionary Committees occasionally brandish their power, Qaddafi shows that he still commands an active and terrifying cadre that he can release against any who question his decisions.

The formerly imprisoned dissidents have no plans to rescue the union, and since there is no chance of starting a new union, a sense of resignation competes with a sense of relief. "With the union, there was pretense of coexistence and dialogue. Now they've decided to break it off. That's fine. We'll have more time to focus on our work and maybe become better writers," said my friend, a critic who had spent ten years in jail. "You watch. They'll come back to us and ask us to write for their journals and to publish with their publishing houses. These people can't produce culture; they don't even care to produce it. They just want to make sure they're not criticized," another writer at our table added.

"Can you still do that, can you still contribute without somehow addressing the terrible political situation?" I ask them. "The people of this country have been repressed for so long and in so many ways, they've become cautious about everything. Musicians can't think up new melodies. We have painters in their sixties who have not painted anything different from what they did in college. It's all due to the regime, of course, but what if there's no chance to change it? Do you just quit?" said the critic. "Sometimes you have to treat the symptoms while you hope for a cure," the writer chimed in. Our conversation lasted for hours.

10 July 2006

At about noon, I visit Z to pay condolences on the passing of his father, a leading member and later a historian of the Omar al-Mukhtar Society. Funerals and wakes here are social occasions where people catch up on gossip, and this one was especially well attended because of the man's renown. Z's father passed away in the United Arab Emirates and was buried there. He'd left Libya in the early 1980s and was considered part of the opposition to the regime. The mourners came also to honor Z, a well-known professor and former chairman of al-Ahly Benghazi Club.

I sat next to Z, among two airline pilots and several businessmen and educators. The previous night a member of the Revolutionary Committees, paying tribute to Z's father, spoke longingly of the 1960s, when the country had legitimate elections. While some were curious about the details of the revolutionary's speech, none were surprised. Such backtracking by members of the Revolutionary Committees has taken place often in the past few years. It was the mention of political parties and elections that was new. The Qaddafi regime bans political parties; anyone attempting to start one can receive a death sentence. Some wondered whether the new tone would result in Seif's starting a reformist party and the Revolutionary Committees' heading their own. This is the de facto split right now in the country. Several former members of the Revolutionary Committees and independent intellectuals, along with most of the business sector, have allied themselves with Seif. Many others have remained on the fence, uncertain of Seif's power and just too weirded out by the fact that the dictator's son is leading the opposition.

Last February Seif was quick to react to riots in Benghazi instigated by the Danish cartoons of the prophet Muḥammad and an Italian government minister's anti-Muslim comments. A government-led protest escalated to a riot as young men forced their way into the Italian consulate and burned the European Union and Italian flags. Security forces killed two rioters. The next day the riots spread: more people were killed and more buildings burned. Seif attributed the unrest to

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internal social and economic factors. His father argued that Libyans were still agitated by the history of Italian colonization. The head of the city's security department was sacked. The injured were flown immediately to hospitals in Egypt, Jordan, and Tunisia, some with the help of Seif, others with the aid of the Revolutionary Committees–led government.

When I got to Benghazi this summer, people hardly mentioned the riots. The issue did not come up at today's wake. I noticed that several mourners in our circle wore watches with the al-Ahly Benghazi emblem on them. Those people are part of a fundraising campaign for the club, I was told. Last year, al-Ahly's football squad made it to the national league's premier division. The players train on other clubs' fields. A few days ago my brother pointed from his car to Ahmad Ben Souied, al-Ahly's former star and current coach, and said, "See the briefcase he's carrying. That's where al-Ahly Benghazi is these days." The club's lands are said to have been distributed among leaders of the Revolutionary Committees. One of the three young men imprisoned for the July 2000 riot had committed suicide in custody.

As I was about to leave the wake, Z told me to stay. Trays with large bowls of *makaroona embakbaka* arrived. "This is the dinner you missed out on four years ago," said a friend who remembered that night at the beach house. The *makaroona* was delicious and worth the wait, I told him. "That's the pace we're at here," he replied.

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