

THE DESERT, THE RIVER & THE ISLAND

Naim Kattan's Short Stories

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WITH THE APPEARANCE OF Naim Kattan's fourth volume of short stories critical assessment, which has lagged far behind his output, is long overdue. Like Norman Levine's fiction, Kattan's displays a stylistic clarity to portray the two sides of a borderline existence and the need to renew one's life at any given moment.¹ The stories encompass a variety of cultural situations — Arabic, Jewish, European, North and South American — each characterized by a sense of absence — whether spatial, temporal, or existential. While the title of the first volume, *Dans le désert*, seems to locate spatially or existentially an arid wasteland setting, the introductory "En bordure du désert" shifts the frame of reference to the borderline. Indeed, the titles of the four volumes of short stories suggest diasporic boundaries or borderlines between space and non-space: in the desert, the crossing, the river's edge, and the island's sand.² This marginality of space through the diaspora is matched by Kattan's diachronic base of biblical history that emphasizes themes of waiting, expectation, memory, and renewal — boundaries between time and no-time. "Le récit, marque la halte entre la mort et la vie nouvelle." Kattan poses a series of rhetorical questions in the introductory "En bordure du désert" that bear directly on the themes within the stories themselves as characters at turning points in their lives judge their past performances. Have they lived a full life? Or have they lived a false existence? Will memory be a source of energy and renewal or will it dissipate into nostalgia that blocks future achievement? Kattan analyzes the spatial title, *In the Desert*, from temporal and existential perspectives: historically the title is a literal translation of *Numbers*, the fourth book of the Old Testament, which chronicles the Jews' forty years in the desert before reaching the Promised Land. Like the children of Israel, the protagonists of the short stories inhabit a desert while looking forward to a new life.

The first story, "Le Tableau," contrasts the eternity of a large Corot canvas in the Frick Gallery with the transitory rendezvous between the narrator and his lover as the former indulges in an interior monologue addressed to his absent

lover. Effusive in his love, the narrator repeats his lover's "sourire d'éternité," her synecdochic representation played off against the immortal canvas. The story interweaves three levels of time: the past when the two lovers met in San Francisco two years before the story opens; the present as the narrator describes the canvas and the tourists who pass by to examine it; and the future expectation of the reunion of the two lovers which occurs in the last paragraph. All of the characters remain nameless, suspended between ghostlike evanescence and eternity, while the name and canvas of Corot serve as a focal point for the reunion, the passing tourists, and the narrator's Browningsque musings about love and art. "Tu n'étais plus qu'un tableau" fully identifies the woman and the painting, yet all that we learn of her is that she has left her husband and has one son who is very ill in hospital. The story begins and ends with questions: What will they do now that they are reunited? Can they reclaim their past passion? "Le Tableau" seems very much a phenomenological study examining the intersubjective responses of characters to each other and to the Corot canvas that is the common, immortal ground for international tourists. Despite the painting's vast horizon there are weighty limits everywhere, just as freedom has its own boundaries. "Peut-on enfermer l'espace pour que son étendue ne brise pas notre imagination, ne la reduise pas à la répétition perpetuelle d'une image affadie de notre soif?" Can the narrator recover his past emotions as Corot has managed to do throughout the ages?

The somewhat surreal blending of different chronological sequences recurs in "Rue Abou Nouas" with the Djila river measuring time and emotion in the objective-correlative manner of the Corot canvas. The opening paragraph in the third person acts as a frame for the narrator who is seized by nostalgia for his past in Baghdad as the water flows by him. The rest of the story switches to first-person narration with alternations between the oriental past in Baghdad and the occidental present in Ottawa. Towards the end the paragraphs become shorter, the alternations more lyrical. While the Iraqi scenes with Hassan and Hind are filled with love, nature, and the out of doors, the Ottawa scenes are predominantly indoors with the narrator isolated for the weekend in his friend's apartment. The first transition epitomizes the difference; the natural rhythm of love and the river changes to the new mechanical elevator that is already decrepit. He further contrasts the two streets — Rideau and Abou Nouas — until the end of the story when he comes to the clock, the pendulum oscillating between two hemispheres: "Voici l'horloge. C'est la Porte de l'Est. Ici commence la rue Abou Nouas." The gateway to the east returns to primitive origins at the same time as it welcomes the dawn of a personal renaissance.

The third story, "Sur le Balcon," also has a double spatial-temporal frame of reference between Blois of the past and Rio in the present. The balcony setting points to the interface between internal privacy and the public outside admired

by the narrator but feared by his paranoid friend Julio. On the balcony overlooking the beach with whose pleasures the characteristically hedonistic narrator identifies, Julio reminisces about their escapade twenty years earlier with a young woman in Blois, the illuminated château contrasting with the Rio highrise. The contrapuntal rhythm of the memories of French youth combined with the domesticated actions of Julio's Brazilian neighbours highlights his Kafkaesque vision of a world pursuing him as he decays in his own paranoia. The narrator cannot comprehend who is persecuting Julio, but the latter's reference to Gogol's *Dead Souls* provides a clue, for the Russian novelist was a tortured man like Julio whose soul is enslaved to thanatos; and Julio, like Chichikov, collects souls from the past.

Like "Sur le Balcon," "L'Hôtel" creates a Kafkaesque atmosphere with the wealthy, sixty-four-year-old protagonist suffering from paranoia as he checks all the locks in his hotel room. Now that his mother has died, Maurice has finally gained his independence but he does not know what to do with his leisure in a strange country where he does not understand the language. He has situated himself in this manner to avoid the past and become a new, liberated man, master of his own destiny. Yet the shadow of his mother accompanies his inherited wealth as he becomes a flâneur and remembers his missed opportunities with Muriel and Ginette. Unable to enjoy his present freedom because of past failures and future expectations, Maurice prepares to return home with the memory of his deceased mother weighing heavily upon him.

A hotel also provides the setting in "La Rupture" which explores split and shifting identities in the form of the narrator's interior monologue alternating between his two lovers, Marcia and Edith. As the protagonist waits to meet Marcia at the Plaza, the second paragraph shifts to the past tense to Holland with the narrator suffering from a toothache and waiting for Edith. Indeed, through much of his fiction Kattan repeats the multiple love affairs, plural identities from the past, and waiting in expectation for the fulfillment of love celebrated in a torrent of consciousness and linguistic sensuality. The lyrical interplay of paragraphs creates a synchronic *ménage à trois*, but the paradox of absolute love for each woman cannot be sustained beyond the bounds of a short story which allows this experiment in form. The relationships become dreamlike until the present reality intrudes and ruptures the emotion as love ends. Kattan's urgent and spontaneous overflow of emotions — perhaps an oriental trait — requires a spatial objective correlation to supplement the temporal stream of consciousness.

KATTAN'S CHARACTERS find themselves again in the desert or on its fringes in his second collection, *La Traversée*, for they are on the

threshold traversing two modes of being, and in this intermediate state a gap always remains between characters separated by age, geography, and sex. So many of the characters are emigrants, travellers, or transients visiting friends, family, or lovers before pursuing another destination. Having crossed the Atlantic in *La Traversée*, Kattan relies on Canadian settings far more than in the earlier stories. In "La Fin du voyage" a young couple, recently married, return to Montreal from Africa to stay with the wife's parents, but soon grow tired of the routine and decide to move into their own apartment. After their extensive travelling, the end of their voyage presumably coincides with the end of the story when they are about to settle down to a new life in which "Peut-être allait-elle se remettre à aimer son mari." But the flat, neutral tone of the story's last line, "Il n'y avait dans sa voix ni colère ni amertume," provides no guarantee that the future will prove promising; experience ends one stage of life only to be followed by the unknown in the next stage.

The title of the second story, "Les Bagages," also implies some kind of journey: this time, a female narrator recounts her love for and marriage with Edouard. "Et maintenant que tout est fini, je cherche à reprendre le fil afin de comprendre." The clash between the anglophone South African husband and his bourgeoisie francophone wife reaches a crisis after they move to the east end of Montreal. At first the marriage ceremony had been "un départ, une reprise. Elle traça une frontière, marqua un passage d'un état à un autre." But soon after they settle into a routine which includes Edouard's insistent courting of the lower-class neighbours, she decides to leave him. "Qui était-il, lui qui connaissait si bien mes origines? Soudain, il m'est apparu, tel que je l'imaginai: un homme qui me voulait, que je desirais et dont je ne savais rien." So she crosses the city to her parents' home where she realizes that she has forgotten to bring her luggage with her. "Il fallait retraverser la ville, seule, pour aller chercher mes bagages." Exiled in her own home, the narrator compresses her existence into portable baggage to start a new life or resume her pre-Edouardian origins, having traversed Montreal and an important stage in her life's cycle.

The female narrator in "Le Substitut" also suffers from insufficient knowledge of the men in her life. Recently divorced, she meets Donald who restores her love when he visits her in Montreal away from his own wife and two children in Quebec City. But as soon as he crowds her apartment with his own daughter and his mistress, Odile, who is presented as his cousin, life becomes difficult until the narrator discovers the truth about Odile and decides to move from her own apartment. Donald substitutes for her estranged husband, and Odile in turn is a mistress for Donald. Once again insufficient knowledge of origins leads to a flat, physical separation in the light of a more recent revelation. "Sans prévenir personne, je suis allée chercher mes meubles. Je suis enfin seule. Je crois que Donald n'était pas un homme pour moi." Many of the other stories in *La Traversée*

present lonely and anonymous passengers from an Arabic bookseller isolated in Prince Edward Island to an Arabic preserver of an outdated alphabet in Edmonton.

The stories in the third collection, *Le Rivage*, demonstrate Kattan's continuing preoccupation with themes of departure, expectations in beginning a new life, waiting, absences, and repetition. In the first story, "Les Adieux," the first-person narrator, George, visits Paris with his cousin's wife, Brita; they desire each other but do not consummate their affair before returning to America. "J'avais l'impression qu'elle allait partir pour toujours." Mimi, the protagonist of the last story "L'Attente," carries her passport with her at all times since she is a perpetual foreigner. "Et elle exhibait le document qu'elle emportait toujours dans son sac à main, même quand il n'était nullement question pour elle d'un départ pour l'étranger. L'étranger, ce mot-là faisait sourire. Où commençait cette frontière et où s'arrêtait-elle? Mimi était toujours à l'étranger." With her Egyptian past, her South American experience, and her languages and accents, Mimi concentrates the whole world in herself in Vancouver; nevertheless, despite this world of experience "elle était seule et elle attendait." The story ends, as it commonly does in Kattan's fiction, by sounding a note of departure as Mimi reflects, "Oui, il va falloir que je parte. Les rues de Vancouver lui semblaient alors comme la seule réalité définitive, recelant la fraîcheur de la nouveauté et une fixité d'éternité. Et alors, comme par une irrépressible illumination, elle était envahie par le sentiment de les regarder pour la première et la dernière fois."

In between these first and last stories appear several short stories that focus on broken love affairs, divorces, absences, and other departures that are often set in apartments, hotels, restaurants, or other public places where actions during vacations contrast with habitual domestic routine. In "Les Comptes" an elderly brother and sister discuss members of their family who have abandoned them: "Ils sont tous partis: mariés, divorcés, remariés." Yet they look forward to the routine of their next Sunday visit: "ils attendaient avec impatience de les revivre, leurs voix leur parvenant comme un lointain écho." "Les Messages" recalls the earlier "Le Libraire de l'Île" since in both stories situated in the Maritimes the bookish protagonists are forced to leave when the privacy of their routines is interrupted by external forces. "Et quand il partirait, personne ne s'en apercevrait."

"L'Etude" refers to physical space as well as to a state of mind. An illusory centre of the world, David Christopher's study contrasts with a diverse macrocosm: his Belgian father-in-law makes his fortune in Texas and settles in Montreal with his British wife; his own parents live in Hamilton; and he alternates weekly between Bishop's and McGill, his utopian study somewhere between the river and the desert. Spatial irony appears in the opening reference to the "Far West" and the repeated "Est" and "Occident" which will be affected by

the global reverberations of a modernized Casaubon's economic theories. Ironically, while his father-in-law made a fortune, the "expert" economist fails to progress in an essentially marginal universe. Irony also arises from the religious terminology applied to the holy study: "le péché primordial, la transgression suprême d'un pacte, d'un accord sacré."

But the spatial borderline of the river's edge must also be viewed from a temporal perspective of the boundary between past and future. Thus, David announces that he is "un futur économiste," and according to his own criteria he never achieves the rank of economist, for his sterile theories belong to the desert, like his passionless love for Carla who reciprocates in a routine of perfect harmony. With the announcement of his mother's hospitalization, the present impinges on the "timeless" study, and David returns the call, his voice full of "l'ennui et l'indifférence." The emergency call provides Carla with a sudden revelation as she enters her husband's inner sanctum to discover his emptiness, her own naiveté, and her hitherto undeveloped emotions of pity and compassion. The reader is left with Carla on the inconclusive bank of the river, not knowing what hope the future will offer. If the desert remains sterile and the river offers potential fertility, then the river's edge represents another transitional image of the borderline existence between the desert's memory and the river's promise of possible fulfilment.

KATTAN'S FOURTH VOLUME of short stories, *Le Sable de l'Île*, opens with "Les Yeux fermés," the title referring at once to the literal physical reaction of one of the characters and the figurative condition of ignorance shared by the two major characters. Ruth and Mordecai, two former inmates of the concentration camps, rendezvous at the bar of Montreal's Ritz-Carlton furnished with "les dames d'un chic suranné dans le décor insolite du début du siècle." Mort's name, Ruth's "air d'absence," and the absence of their respective spouses contribute to the disjunction between their past tragedy united by memories of the holocaust, and present love united sexually in a motel room after they have left the Ritz. By keeping her eyes closed and repeating Mordecai's name during their lovemaking, Ruth manages to obliterate the past through total immersion in the present. "Ruth fermait les yeux, l'entourant de tout son corps, cherchant avec acharnement un abri, le lieu où, au-delà de l'oubli, elle découvrirait enfin une immobile sécurité." Then, one day she opens her eyes and a double shock results: the expression in her eyes recalls the past for Mort, while Ruth cannot bear his discovery of her innermost self. "Ces yeux le renvoyaient à son monde, au malheur de toujours. Lui, qui voulait être une armure et une protection, n'était qu'un fragile résidu, si foncièrement, si fatalement vulnérable." And once he has invaded her privacy, "elle ne pouvait plus subir Mort sans étouffer."

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Departure is inevitable: "il partait en voyage" while she hangs up the phone "sans dire un mot" in contrast to Ruth's former repetition of Mort's name.

The other stories in this collection such as "Une Fin" and "Le Déménagement" further demonstrate the sense of an ending or the instability of moving from one situation to another as characters after some revelation ineluctably divorce and depart while awaiting a new life. Characters from diverse backgrounds meet by chance, and with incomplete knowledge of their origins they become involved with each other. When an epiphany occurs foregrounding the present, the future of relationships is thrown into doubt. The short story seems an appropriate vehicle or genre for the presentation of transient relationships because the high degree of selectivity requires spatial limitations with inconclusive endings that keep the reader wondering about the possibilities for the characters' renewal after the story's closure. The completion of a "nouvelle" implies renewal: the short story serves as the intermediate bank of a river that can overflow its borders to renew the desert.

NOTES

- ¹ Absence of elaborate patterns of imagery in Kattan's fiction may be attributable to his "oriental" conception of confronting reality directly as outlined in his first book of essays, *Le Réel et le théâtral*. This stylistic transparency or "zero degree" coupled with the separateness of each story compounds the difficulty of any critical approach. In contrast to the separate stories of Kattan or Levine, the more interconnected format of Alice Munro's or Jack Hodgins' fiction provides opportunities for stylistic development or structural thickening. See W. H. New, "Pronouns and Propositions: Alice Munro's Short Stories," *Open Letter*, Third Series, No. 5 (Summer 1976), 40-49.
- ² For a discussion of "river" and "sand" symbols see Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power* (New York: Seabury, 1978), pp. 83-84 and 86-87. For the semiotics of boundaries, border regions, and "rivage" see Anne Ubersfeld, "The Space of Phèdre," *Poetics Today*, 2 (Spring 1981), 203-06; and for a striking similarity with Kattan's categories of memory, promise, place, and desert see Jacques Derrida, *L'Écriture et la Différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), pp. 101 and 109.

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