

An extract from *Isle of Males* by Aziz Benhaddouch, translated by Alice Guthrie

The teacher ate the last two madeleines in the packet, drank a hot cup of tea, and smoked a cigarette (or something like a cigarette) – perhaps that would restore to him some of the life that came to him by night and departed by day. He gathered his tools together, piling them up so they would smash some philosophers' bones, then set off for the classroom. Idriss was not like the people of the Isle of Males; they were still looking, examining, wondering, but they did not dare let on what they truly wanted. Everything there happened in silence. Jalabas everywhere, faces wearing masks that hid a lot of talk and a lot of pain.

Some of Idriss's pupils were quite old – men with beards, and women ready for life – but they would need a huge amount of support if they were to become as mighty as their ancestors. The teacher was not the first Socrates to come to the Isle of Males. There had been someone before him. Yesterday had left its mark, and it would be up to Idriss to decipher it well.

The pupils knew their new philosophy teacher was freshly graduated. Scared by his inexperience, they were all sizing him up, attempting to ascertain the nature of his relationship with religion, and with Amazigh, and with the Earth. They wanted to find everything out in record time, but their questions actually revealed more about them than they informed them about their teacher. Their questions revealed the way of life led by people in the Isle of Males.

The first meetings with his pupils were harsh and challenging for Idriss. He knew that knowledge began with a person recognising their own ignorance, so he began drawing the pupils' ignorance out, mining it and placing it before them for them to examine and thus realise the extent of the delusions they were labouring under. They were rebellious, enraged, criticising the state of the country, the people, the Earth. Many of them grew beards in declaration of something or other. An unfounded, baseless and irresponsible revolt. They started from the beginning: *Who are you? Who are we? What does it mean to be human?*

How memorable is the mirror's frequent presence in Idriss's philosophy classes. Explaining the concept of consciousness one day, he said:

“When you stand before a mirror and look beyond what you share with others, once you’ve shed all moral, religious and political masks, and you’re standing stripped naked of everything, contemplate yourselves. Meditate on what those selves contain – the lies, the hate, the vanity, the egotism and the many other things seen by no one but God and the owners of those selves, yourselves. When you attain that bare and exposed state, you will ask yourselves: who made us this way, and why? Who carved our personalities out in all their precise detail? How much freedom is allotted to us, within all this structure? Wonder, step back a little, contemplate – then go out to seek the truth of your own selves. No one is deliberately a coward, but he might be raised on cowardice, and on shouting in silence, loving in silence. You all want to speak, but you don’t have tongues. Are you really what you want to be? Let’s do an experiment.”

Idriss asked them all to close their eyes and try to summon up such events and memories as were unknown to anyone else but them. Then he said: “Now, have a look and see whether it was truly *you* who wanted to do those things that you dare not admit having done? Or are there sometimes circumstances that make a person do things they don’t want to do?”

Heat radiated around the classroom. The students’ minds were steaming. Idriss opened the windows, then they all took a little break.

*Back we come, but not as we were. We’ve grown more anxious, and feel more ignorant, weaker and more lost than ever.*

A collective cry went up of “What is to be done?” to which Idriss responded with, “Well, let’s turn to philosophy”.

Philosophy is like Josef’s eau de vie: within the classroom it enlivens, and outside the classroom it slays. Because the outside world is chock full of gaps – no room in there for wisdom, or as Averroes called it “the sister of law”.

The first lesson was on the subject of the human being, as was the last. But the last lesson went into greater depth. Even though there is in fact no first or last to the human lesson, and no such thing as superficial or deep within a person.

The steps grew bigger and bigger. Idriss got to know the various residential areas, the people, and the names of some of the tribes. He realised that despite being from there, he was also from here, because here was –in essence – there.

Earthen colours prevailed, and spread. Extensive and expansive spaces for the voyager, the meditator, the ascetic mystic, nothing on the face of the Earth except a little bit of life.

The villages, the houses, and the people were all ancient. There was history and memory behind all of those marks drawn on the mountains and the rocks, like tattoos on women's foreheads. Every inch of you, Isle of Males, is a monument standing as proof of an absence that refuses to be forgotten.

The villages seemed like Athenian ships sailing across the brown sandy ground. The Isle of Males mimics everything: it's a semi-desert, it's semi-mountainous, semi-urban, semi-rural – and it's a peninsula. Although Idriss was utterly astonished by how rich in stories the gaps were, this semi-being held no charm for him. “You either *are*, or you're *not*,” he said. “This semi-existence befits you, my dear Isle: you are history, a bit of living memory, and a lot of future.”

He knew that in order to teach he would first have to learn. He must get to know the people, their culture, their representation of religion and values and teaching, their games and their way of dressing, their rites of happiness and sorrow. But first of all he needed a tongue, one that would allow him to reach the worlds that still lay beyond seemingly insurmountable barriers.

Dialogue with the people required an Amazigh tongue. So he went forth to converse with the Earth, with the villages scattered around and about, with some of the birds, snakes and scorpions, and with the rivers, dry except for a few tiny pools.

Some of the teachers would go out every Sunday to explore the empty spaces around them. They would pack provisions for the road, many questions, and some sticks to lean on and be led along by until they reached the village of Tisleet (the Bride).

Every tribe has its bride, except for the Asmaan tribe, whose name means “lightning” in Amazigh. Tisleet, this bride-village, had rosy cheeks. Her soil was the colour of roses, her trees like towering adolescent girls. Her massive solid rocks had seen a lot, and wanted to talk about it all, to tell her story. And they did, in fact, but unfortunately it was in Amazigh and the teachers were listening in Arabic.

The men of teaching bid farewell to the men of Tisleet. They picked up the Earth's colours to carry with them, took pictures of the place, then left. They went on like this, working their way around from one village to another. Whenever they drew near to the centre of the Isle the colour of people's faces changed notably. The Isle of Males began to resemble Africa. The explorers came home in the evening with much data that needed analysing, and a sufficient quantity of eau de vie from the Arabs' cousin, Josef.

The place began to offer up meaningful signs and symbols, and philosophy took on a whole other flavour. The night grew a little more bitter. Idriss loved the place more than the people; even though the beginnings had been bloody, *on this Earth there is what makes life worth living*, as Mahmoud Darwish said just the other day. Like people anywhere, the people there had a memory, and a history packed with incidents and events. There are stories of the Mehdi Ibn Tumart there, and historian Mohammed al-Baydhaq (known as "the pawn") was also of Senhaja tribal origin. They were captains of ships betrayed by the wind and lost on the high seas. Sons of kings, they were, but wandered off track and never came back.

The Earth talks. It narrates the life-stories of a people, it tells of the tribes' glory in the fight for the freedom of soil and water and air. They had really and truly passed through here. Their scent still perfumed the place. They were never barbarians or rabble, they were like everyone else. Kohl made by women, perfume made from musk, and cloves, and henna flowers; passion as a system, and beauty as a being. The soil lent its colour to the toys and the tools, to the goat horns and all the other things that sprang from it.

Idriss returned to the classroom. He genuinely loved his pupils. He knew how old they were, how steeped they were in a history that was theirs, even if they did not know it. Their resident mountain, Mount Sirwa, near to the Ait Usmaan tribal lands, stood in witness to all of it.

In the Isle of Males people met up and got to know each other. They realised that although they were all from one homeland, they were different to each other. Idriss's housemate, the Arabic language teacher, was from the city of Errachidia, or what used to be known as Ksar Es Souk. Their other housemate was from the area around Zagora city. Paths intersected, cultures overlapped, but everyone

clung to their own children, and would risk their life to defend them. The homeland was divided and splintered to the point of turning into mini-states carved out by tribes. Estrangement prevailed. Tribe was elevated, and people were known by their geographical affiliation: Rissani and Tangiers folk, Al Hoceima and Marrakech, Rabat and Salé and environs.

Once, on market day, the Arabic language teacher ran into an acquaintance of his who was the schools principal for an area called Timghliddt. The teacher was unable to shake off the principal, who came home with him, befriended the household, stayed the night, ate up their food and was not in the least bit shy.

Every day Idriss would meet a great number of people, and forget a great number of them. But the principal of Timghliddt, this obligatory new friend, was discordantly unforgettable. He talked about everything except teaching. He informed the teachers of how they could save money at home and abroad, since he used to travel to France in the summer holidays and sell doughnuts and black coffee on the beaches there. He hoped to turn the teachers into a workforce, as he wanted to expand his business. How weird: a teacher, a principal, an educator, selling shit to shit. When he was picked up by the police he would simply tell them he was a teacher, and they would let him off, out of respect for the teaching profession. “If I went to France I wouldn’t tell them I was an educator”, said Abdellah, the Arabic language teacher. “The principal got to France before us. He’s occupied that whole place.”

The principal, or the Haji, was a fan of cheap tins of sardines, especially those that he pilfered, or “borrowed”, from the school canteen. He also frequently ate the pupils’ equipment – jotters, chalk, pencils, some of the wooden classroom doors. He was keen to gobble up pupils and people.

One dry day of the winter term the Haji paid the teachers a visit at home. He ate lunch, and then he slept. The teachers asked him to take off his shoes, so that he could sleep comfortably, but he refused. He slept with his shoes on. He woke up after the aser prayer and went out. He came back in the evening carrying half a kilo of rice, which he handed to the Arabic language teacher, demanding that he make dinner.

It was bitterly cold outside, and the wind was making strange scary sounds, but the Haji principal still didn't set off. He wasn't leaving. The three friends knew then that he would not be travelling that evening: he would spend the night in their company. He could not sleep all night in his shoes, so there was no alternative to him taking them off, but when he did he stank out the whole place and made everyone feel nauseous. The principal's feet were unbearably fetid. Idriss asked him to wash his feet, insisting that he use Tide laundry detergent. The Haji didn't feel at all awkward or embarrassed by this. Off he went to the toilet, and stayed there a long time. But when he rejoined the group he was as he had left: the teachers still smelled something disgusting, even if it had somehow been disinfected.

