



**Hisham Matar.** *The Return: Fathers, sons and the land in between* (Viking Press, London, 2016, 288 pp., ISBN 0670923338, also available as an e-book).

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Libya currently features in European news as a site of disorder verging on anarchy, where rival militias roam and warring factions prevent the establishment of civil power through elections. It is also newsworthy as a place of perilous transit, where people traffickers imprison, abuse and blackmail migrants trying to reach Europe, which some do in the leakiest and least sea-worthy boats imaginable. In short, Libya seems a mess.

There is another Libya. It has five UNESCO world heritage sites, though two of them—the magnificent Roman ruins of Leptis Magna and Sabratha—remind you that this stretch of coast has had a long history of conquerors.

There is another Libya. It has art, music, cafes, surprisingly thriving. It has human beings, who care about family, who remember and recite poetry, who believe in peaceful and prosperous civil society. Many of them are dead, killed by regimes of which Muammar Gaddafi's was the most tenacious in holding on to power. One of those killed, maybe, maybe not, is Hisham Matar's father. *The Return* is his son's account of living with the un-knowledge of what happened to his father after he was arrested in 1990. Delivered to Gaddafi's regime by the Egyptian secret police, his father was imprisoned in Abu Salim prison as a prominent dissident. There were reports, sightings, stories: arranged meetings years later which added fragments, maybe true, maybe not. Uncertain identifications are complicated by a mass of unidentified bodies: in 1996 there was a massacre at the prison; according to one estimate, more than twelve hundred prisoners were murdered. Was Matar's father among them? *The Return* is a son's memoir of grief for something which may have happened, and resistance to assuming it happened. It is a double exile: from his country, until he goes back in 2012, and from the country of harsh emotion and slow healing which makes up grief. The memoir's subtitle—'*Fathers, sons*

*and the land in between*—takes that land as literal, the country of Libya, and poetic, the desert which is not a waste land but a place where navigational stars shine clearly. The UK hardback has a graphic of two birds on the cover, one dark, one light; in the paperback, there is only one. In a world of mysterious disappearance, presence is better remembered.

Through Matar's memoir, Abu Salim prison joins an infamous list of places of state violence—besides concentration camps, prisons such as Abu Ghraib, Tadmor, Guantanamo, Lubyanka, Evin, Berlin-Hohenschönhausen—where inhuman cruelty to human bodies and spirits aims to break and destroy political forces of opposition. Life writing recognises second and third generation responses to the dynamic of war and trauma as a distinct genre, one which evokes distinct ghosts. That list of prisons metonymises very different histories, in which part of the pain for descendants concerns the world not recognising that suffering as distinct. That's not the same as claiming uniqueness: rather, brutality seems to produce an insistence on particularity. Everyone is Spartacus, but each Spartacus is special.

We know war is hell so well now that perhaps literature has handed over to cinema as the medium which can show us best the hell unique to each war. Yet *The Return* is a kind of war classic. Matar's cousin Zizzo is turned from a gentle young student into a dedicated sniper, his affectionate nature condensed to a single love for one fellow soldier. The main figure, Matar's father Jabilla, is an exception, gradually revealed to be humane, cultured, even noble. In prison his invisible voice recites poetry, soothing the horrors of night for his fellow prisoners—who include other family members. When the young ones are taken out for torture sessions, he calls out cheerily that if they get stuck for a name to confess, they can say he put them up to it. Underneath the narrative runs a Wordsworthian current, or even two. The child fathers the man, as the author returns to scenes from his childhood and youth, in ways familiar in life writing. Matar develops it adventurously: the child is father to the man his father was, and the child his father was to his grandfather. It's an interesting literary form of patriarchy constituted through filial history. An uncanny moment comes when Hisham, having returned to Benghazi to give a literary reading, is approached by an old man with tears in his eyes and a book in his hands. The book is a student publication which contains two stories written by his father. Neither Hisham nor his mother knew they existed. Were it not that his grief is so intense, the family so damaged and the country so oppressed, you might wonder if hagiography was haunting the memoir. But Matar's quest is not to find his father but to find out what happened to him, a different drive. In life writing terms, it entails scrupulous honesty if it is to engage readers and persuade them

of the value of looking, and the truthfulness of how the personal is political. His desire to know the truth expands to be a desire to know the truth about everything, including himself; a capacity for great attention, for close observation, produces a distinctive integrity.

Many of the finest books are more than one thing: *The Return* is a personal memoir, a family, political and national memoir, a biography of a father, an autobiography of a son, a song of an exile. Formally it moves between different moments, as memory does, yet its wandering chronology includes an architecture of reflection and narrative in which people and places are given evocative histories. Mussolini's campaign of genocide with its blights of colonial occupation—more prison camps, with deliberate starvation of civilians—is sketched, and sketched because it is sketchily known; such records as there were have largely been destroyed. Matar's immediate family history joins a long line of ghosts.

*The Return* has a remarkable ending: it comes to rest softly, a boat's prow sliding into sand. Matar, now in his forties, goes into the kitchen where his aunt is making pastry; he has woken from a troubling dream, and helps her knead the dough. This moment leaves the story in media res—in media rise even—and aptly. Grief doesn't end: it goes on inhabiting the everyday, every day. Yet the moment is also a gentle reminder of gentleness, also everyday, where working dough symbolises the labour of love, literally and figuratively knocking back, like kneading dough, so that something sustaining and shareable can be made.

Shortlisted for half a dozen international literary prizes, *The Return* won among others the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for biography. Famous writers have queued up to praise it and acclaim it as a classic. For life writers, it is a very rich—and very teachable—text: one which calls into question the borders of national literature, and which raises all sorts of questions about inheritances, whether filial, familial, tribal, national or linguistic. It also explores what gifts literature bequeaths to writers and to readers. And most of all it asks, what consolation is possible, if you don't know how your father died?