

Oasis

On the edges of the largely desolate Algerian desert, songs and prayers sometimes help to bear one's existence, akin to a fleeting taste of happiness... That morning, humming cheerfully to himself, the blacksmith of a small oasis opens the door to his workshop.

His apprentice is already there, and is getting the fire ready by pulling on the rope attached to the forge's bellows. The flames are lively, and the smell of smoke is easy to get used to. The hammer striking the anvil begins to add rhythm to the blacksmith's jaunty refrain, and myriad sparks fly. The apprentice, silent and streaming with sweat, watches the blacksmith with much admiration and even with pride. Gradually, as the metal is worked, the blacksmith's steely features harden and his song is drowned out by the sound of the anvil.

This is the way each day passes, and has done for several generations; the blacksmith's musical, magnificent toil that ensures that the farmers' ploughing implements are kept sharp.

Indeed, these very farmers, having been alerted by the anvil's booming echo, spontaneously gather in front of the workshop. The blacksmith's face becomes wreathed in smiles. He greets his guests with a few words of welcome. Es Salam Aleïcum. Then all squat on a fibre mat. Tea is drunk, jokes are shared, discussions are had on the state of the crops, and the blacksmith answers the farmers' requests

for help. Today, several of them are absent. The mood turns sadder... Strange thoughts take hold. And worries too...

Not far from the workshop there is a square where alleys meet; shady alleys that run alongside the overlapping ochre earth dwellings. Under the sun's punishing rays, a few palm trees herald a series of layers of protection for the vegetation. And so fruit trees grow under palm trees, the former providing a deeper shade that is kind to market-garden and fodder plant cultivations. With man's help, nature struggles to create a tiny corner of Eden in the depths of the Sahara.

On one side of the square a white minaret rises watchtower-like above the terraces, scanning the four horizons. It is now time to pray, and the muezzin can be heard beyond the buildings, far into the desert's immensity, where everything is sand and stony ground.

And gradually, in that faraway space, the decibels of the muezzin's amplified voice travel and die away as they are outdone by a very different sound: that of a metal winch, monstrous and deafening. In a tumult of dust and noise, men with coal-blackened faces emerge from a mine shaft from where precious minerals are being extracted. Some of those men are the farmers missing from the oasis.

One morning, the blacksmith's workshop stays closed. It was all over for the time enjoyed in the bustling oasis so reminiscent of Eden. Make way for the new; the age-old singing of the blacksmith is no more, it is now time to lose oneself in the earth's dark entrails in order to extract from it black blood and suffering.

Later still, somewhere in the oasis, where only the wind still whistles, it is almost impossible to hear the apprentice. He is crying. He does not want to follow the blacksmith into the mine.

Translated by Christine Scott Fox