

FADI ABU KHALIL

A Continuing Exhibition

Translated from the Arabic

by S. V. Atalla

At the
corner near
Wimpy's
I hesitate.

The cafe is empty today, save for the Egyptian janitor, our friend the Iraqi poet, and a handful of regulars scattered among the tables like wilted lilies. The weather today is more depressing than ever, I think to myself, and the dim light falling across the pavement stirs in me a pity that borders on disgust. It's a quarter to seven on a summer evening, and the season will doubtless bring dozens more scenes of this sort. I walk slowly towards the car parked across the street.

A friend noted recently that the atmosphere in our cafes has come to resemble that among the *hitists* in Algiers. The word comes from *ha'it*, wall, and refers to those addicted to leaning against walls, he explained. It's a name the new generation of Algerians have given themselves, to reflect their unemployment, and the way they pass their time loitering against the walls in miserable, dreary neighborhoods... *Hitist!* He pronounced it with obvious disgust this time. Just then I was distracted by a girl, not bad-looking, who happened to be passing on the opposite side of the street.

We sit like *hitists* at an outdoor table, and order coffee, which we sip with premeditated slowness, in rhythm with the

ticking of the clock, to pass the time. All this time! We are preparing to finish time off completely. Dawud, long addicted to this type of setting, can always find something to comment on or make fun of. Together we watch the types of women passing by – the thin, bony ones, the plump ones with large behinds – and make trite comments. For no reason, we switch to a discussion of culture, that swollen intestine into which we have spit our stupidity and confusion for so long. We note, for example, that colloquial Lebanese poetry – our friend the Iraqi poet's favorite subject – has not been as strongly affected by the wave of modernism as the poetry written in classical Arabic. So-and-so notes that this is completely normal, no cause for alarm, since the colloquial dialect is the language of life, impossible to confine to predetermined forms, and is thus in direct opposition to the concept of modernism, which is in essence a theory of form! Add to this the richness and variety of folk proverbs and oral literature, which only serve to emphasize... and so on, until dark, with the waiter watching us all the while out of the corner of his eye. At two a.m. Dawud slithers with feigned stealth into Chez André, where he will finish time off once and for all.

Some of the espresso cups on the tables, emptied of their dark liquid, reveal cracks tinged with mildew. As for the water, it is quite cold – due to the unreliable electricity following the war – and no doubt laced with hefty doses of lime. A little indigestion, that's all, when the polluted water slides down into your stomach; no disaster, especially when you consider your inability to digest the general scene surrounding you, of which you, by your very presence there in the corner, are a part...

Wimpy's Cafe, on a raised corner in the middle of Hamra Street, is no longer the place it used to be. This gathering place for intellectuals, as they are called these days, may seem to the outsider more like a dilapidated movie set, peopled by the remains of stars who created Beirut's cultural glories in the sixties and seventies. The very phrase "the intellectuals" is an indirect reference to the isolation of a certain social group following the war, a group that turned inward upon itself and withdrew into the darkened corners of cafes, rendered ineffective,

FADI ABU KHALIL

A Continuing Exhibition

like flocks of birds frightened by the continued violence, content to sit there and check out the scene at a quarter to seven. And yet that old cafe, with its modern sixties-style glass and aluminum front, perhaps because of its high vantage point, still symbolizes to us, the regulars, a secret feeling of being divinely detached from our surroundings. It's the one place where you can look from a distance at the "Red Shoe" across the street, for example, and feel you must be doing all right after all, to be able to gaze so steadily at the Red Shoe...

