"At night when the world is empty but for him who mourns his loss...", sung Abbas. He wasn't mourning. But he didn't have that temporary feeling of pleasure that comes with a job well done. He was lost. It's important to know where you're going. Even if you have problems on the way, the important thing is how you deal with them. Ambiguity can be dispelled sometimes with a single word. On the other hand, it only takes a few minutes for everything to be turned upside down when night comes and you don't know where you're going and who you'll find there. You're left alone in darkness and uncertainty, and nightfall becomes something alien, as if the sun has been struck blind, or the world swallowed up by a monster. The firm ground of daytime, instead of just changing colour at your feet as it usually does at night, becomes a sea, vast, dark and uneasy, lit up here and there by patches and flashes of brightness from its lighthouses and harbours.

"At night when the world is empty but for him who mourns his loss...", droned Abbas's voice, chasing away the loneliness, but the sound only confirmed it. His voice rose higher, singing aloud, demanding company, conversing with the night which was inhabited by deep, settled darkness. "At night when the world is empty..." The only thing of beauty in Abbas's voice was that it reminded you of the great Abd al-Wahhab singing the same song, his sweet throat making the darkness companionable, lighting the most delicate candles as far as his gentle voice could reach.

At night the truck groaned, climbed, tilted, snaked, its big covered trailer swaying about because he was taking the unmade side road where there were no checkpoints or traffic policemen. They had withdrawn his licence a long time before because of his poor eyesight, and at night his eyes were worse still and the lorry swung even more violently as it rumbled along on the banks of the small canals, with their uneven surfaces which were not made to accomodate vehicles of any sort.

At night with the strange family squeezed in beside him, the wife against the door where her husband had put her, concerned that she shouldn't be squashed between the two of them, and the children all over the place, on the floor and on their father's and mother's knees and wherever there was room. At night, and the crowded day had passed, that day of days. If you wrote down the story of everything that had hap-

* The original appeared in Cairo in 1981 in the collection Uqtulhā
pened in it, it would take up a whole book, and anyhow nobody would be capable of confining it all in words.

Abbas the driver was drawn by the song and sucked down into its eddy of sound. The night was his old friend, his life, and more than that it had become his fate. He no longer had anywhere else to hide away from the day where ordinary law-abiding people lived their lives, with policemen and traffic checks and driving licences hedging them in. In the daytime everything was ordered and controlled and not a soul could escape from it, so only the night was left for him, empty but for him and the contents of his lorry, inanimate objects and human beings and ghosts. He appealed to it not to abandon him, since he could no longer even see somewhere to pull in on the road ahead.

'Abbas broke off his reverie and asked, "Maryut? Maryut?"

Hajjaj, the passenger and head of the family in the lorry, was glad. Abbas the driver was a person whose habit it was to be silent, always to break off the conversation as soon as the engine started, and if he was obliged to answer a question, to grunt the answer down his nose. Arrogance, they said it was, the arrogance of drivers who know that they're a cut above other people because they know what other people don't know, the secret of a technical skill at their command, the mysterious instrument docile in their hands in a world of hand barrows and buffaloes and braying donkeys. Faraway civilisation was beginning to penetrate the barren wastelands and appear there, miraculous and terrifying, and the master of the machine, Abbas, even if he couldn't see straight, still had that air of disdain about him.

Maryut. Why Maryut? Didn't he realise? Did he think that 'Mr' Hajjaj would knock on Mr. Anis's door at this time of night, and with such a proposition? Maryut, Maryut, Maryut. That idiot Hassan with his belly stuffed full of greed and rottenness. Maryut! Don't forget your mother sold radishes on the street corner even though you got to be a landowner. And you started out with a bundle of material to sell by the metre and half metre in street markets and it's thanks to me that you became the owner of a fat cheque book and a gold plated pen, and can sign away any amount of cash with a signature that's more highly regarded than the signature of the governor of the National Bank. Thanks to me that cheques in your name are considered securer even than proper bank notes with minarets and wonder-working pictures of the sphinx on them. Maryut, Maryut. Hassan, son of Wahiba the radish seller, they called you Hassan the Ram on the day you were born because you looked so stubborn. Then when you went into business and got a barrow they addressed you with respect and the Ram dropped out of your name. People have bad memories for nicknames, especially when