

**Sherko Fatah**  
*Ein weisses Land* (Luchterhand, 2011)  
'A White Land'

Two early chapters  
Translated by Anthea Bell

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*The Lonely German I*

**1**

I sit here watching you like a stranger. But I know you. I may never tell you, but I know you, I know you well. It was a few years ago. An eternity ago. Long enough for you not to recognize me now. But in any case you don't look at me, you never look at anyone directly. You're that important doctor from far away in Germany. And what am I? The errand boy you don't need, who is only a nuisance to you. If you looked at me, however, you'd know me again immediately. We were once as close as two terrified dogs shut up together, we had the same dirt in our mouths, and on that cold night long ago our fear was one and the same, we were a frightened animal with two heads. We saw Death in person striding over the muddy earth. His dirty boots squelched on the damp ground. He was thin, small of stature, he had a large head with a high forehead. He spoke your language. I am sure you haven't forgotten him, no one could. But maybe it's just that you never want to meet him again, not at any price, even if only in memory, in the face of a survivor from that time. I understand you, important man that you are, I understand you very well.

And yet, for God moves in mysterious ways, you have come here. You could have gone anywhere after the war. But no, here you are before my eyes, and the mere sight of you brings back the old fear that once held us both in its grip like an iron fist.

I shift position on the wooden chair that the doctor fetched for me that first day. Without a word, no greeting or any other sign of emotion, the tall, wiry man did it himself. He just left me, the errand-boy, standing in the middle of the hospital ward, and came back after a

little while with the chair. He put it down beside the window. As he passed me again, he briefly pointed behind him.

I watched him go when he disappeared from the ward. We hadn't exchanged a word, although we would have understood one another. I'd thought that Dr. Stein was familiar with the customs of this country. The natural authority with which he moved and issued brief instructions in English, the calm way he raised his hands, waiting like an orchestral conductor frozen in mid-movement for one of the staff to remove his rubber gloves, none of that would ever have left me in any doubt of the doctor's competence. But this man didn't understand anything. Instead of sending me off with the note on which he had listed the items he needed, he went to the bazaar himself. I was astonished when he came back with the little packets, carefully approached me, and held them out to me like presents. But I was only to look after them until the doctor went home early that evening.

It wasn't right. It was an insult. I watched him go. Well, after all, the man was a foreigner. He couldn't know that every foreigner, let alone one as important as he was, had a right to have someone making purchases for him, collecting his letters or taking them to be posted, escorting him to the people he wanted to visit. He could have found that out if he had asked. But then, I thought, shaking my head, he might have found out more than he bargained for, and everything we had seen would have been present in his eyes, filling the space between us.

As it was I sat day in, day out, on my chair by the window, staring at the ward or out at the hospital yard, and waited. Every time the doctor appeared, I rose and stood to attention, expecting to be needed for some purpose. And every time it was another little disappointment when nothing of the kind happened.

On those long afternoons I sometimes wondered whether I was wrong after all. Was it simply that I wanted to recognize the man I knew from the old days in this European doctor? I had talked to very few people about my experiences. When I came back, my ability to give a consecutive account or tell any tale at all was non-existent. And to whom would I have told the tale of a world collapsing in ruins while here, in my own country, everything was the same as before? The familiar streets and alleys, the usual heat and lethargic pace, nothing had changed. No one would have believed what I had seen. I knew that as soon as I set foot on my native soil. Although I could still feel the heat of the fire on my cheeks and forehead, when I could finally speak my own language

again something leapt at my throat – that was exactly what it felt like. Whatever it was, it choked me when I wanted to talk. But no one felt any the worse for not hearing my words. They would have been only the words of the errand-boy Anwar, who could add nothing to the apparent certainties, no doubts, no important information, nothing.

When I understood that I no longer needed to act mute in my new role, but could sustain it effortlessly even if I spoke, I was relieved. During the war I had thought one reason why I would travel endless distances and pass through ruined cities was so that I could tell someone in my own country about it. Everything in me, I thought, was ready for that encounter. But then, when the time came, I hardly said anything.

It's as if you were looking for someone to whom you can pour out your heart, but in reality you are waiting for God. What are a few words linked in a sentence, what can they mean to a stranger? No, what I needed was someone intimate with me, someone who not only understood the words but could pick them up and bring them to life. Who listened to a humming sound but heard the music in it. Only an intimate acquaintance like that would have enabled me to speak at last. Perhaps I had secretly expected that I might yet meet one. And now he seemed to be there in front of me.

Sometimes the doctor came into the ward and glanced at me, as if he were about to give me a job to do after all, but wasn't yet quite sure of himself. I always raised my head slightly and waited. Once, the window behind me was open. The hot wind was blowing in sand and blades of dry grass. There were three beds in the ward, but they were empty, unoccupied, the white curtains around them drawn back. The wind made the curtains shake slightly, like the doctor's white coat and the pile of towels on the metal table beside him. The wind even ruffled the fur of a cat that had suddenly slipped in from the corridor, and now stopped and drew back its head, as if it had lost its way and arrived here accidentally. It was carrying the remains of a placenta from the delivery room in its mouth.

A warm breeze made me take a deep breath. Yes, it is him, I thought at once, no illusion could deceive me like that. He has many grey hairs now, and stoops slightly as he walks. His face does not look old, but grave and unforthcoming. All the same, it's him. And he himself, I suddenly thought I knew, has not found any intimate acquaintance since then. He hasn't talked about it either.

The doctor came over to me, walked carefully around the chair, reached up, with a slight groan, and closed the window. I did not move until he had done it. I would have

helped him if I'd known what he wanted to do. So I watched the cat, which ran away with its find, and brushed the dust off my shoulders, not sure what to do next.

When evening came I stood up and stretched as if my day's work was done. I would have liked to tell the doctor that I had to leave now, but I dared not go looking for him. Instead I stole out of the room, went along the dark corridor, passed the stained walls to the glazed porch, and went out through the entrance doors into the wide yard. The hospital was a new building, but its walls had already darkened, and everything that they surrounded appeared to be ancient.

No one had seen me leave. Very likely the doctor was actually relieved to see the empty chair late that evening. I put my hands in the pockets of my jacket and went downhill along the street leading into the city. I wondered whether I, too, was relieved to get away from the man I had recognized. I must be, I thought, I felt I had to flee from him as animals flee from fire. I stopped when I came to a heap of rubble overgrown by dry bushes.

It was a clear, starlit night. The street ahead of me vanished in a dark dip and did not reappear until it reached the few lights still on in the city, a narrow, empty street. It belongs, I thought, with everything that I wanted to forget.

I went on. Who knows, I reflected, perhaps similar thoughts are going through his head. At least I know that about him: in no circumstances would he show that he was perplexed. That's the difference between a clever man and a simple one like me.

As usual, I was walking almost furtively down the dark alleys. It's part of my job to be unobtrusive. An errand boy is a means of transport. What he offers is reliability. Even when I am not on duty, just walking along like anyone else, I act like an errand boy, I move fast, I appear conscientious and yet reserved. It's pathetic to be proud of a thing like that.

I hurried through the darkness. I was annoyed, yet again, by the doctor's ignorance that kept me sitting on that chair in the hospital. Anyone coming into the ward was bound to look at me, a mere errand boy, as if I were someone important, or at least a patient, until he noticed who I really was and then studiously ignored me.

Light fell into the alleyways from a few houses. I reached the great square where the administration buildings stood, went a little way further in the light of the street lamps erected only recently, and finally reached the alley in which the house where I lived

stood. The central vegetable market was opposite. The local farmers arrived here early in the morning to unload their carts. Now the place was almost uncannily quiet. Piles of empty sacks lay around in the darkness like dead donkeys.

The square hadn't been there very long. As it grew larger and larger, the bazaar was beginning to close in on my once isolated house. At first only traders and visitors had populated the alley by daytime. But then the shops began to spread. Nearby buildings were converted for other purposes or simply demolished, and more and more corrugated metal roofing was built, shading the streets where they used to stand. I tried to see this as a good sign. The war in Europe – and its effects had been felt as far away as Baghdad – was over long ago, the situation had calmed down, and people were trading briskly. But in reality it was the poor who came streaming into the city, more of them all the time, changing it so fast that I could hardly keep up with developments.

The market place lay deserted. I went along the tiny alley to the front door of the house, or what was left of it. Flies settled on my face, a particularly unpleasant sensation in the dark. And yet, as I often thought when I came this way, it was a good idea to vacate the buildings that used to cover so much of the district for the people in charge of this caravanserai. They had built stables for the farmers' mules opposite the new garden wall. There were no animals there now, by night, only the smell told you that they spent early morning until evening there while the farmers were selling their wares.

I unlocked the high, narrow gate, walked along a passage that had been a corridor before the place was converted, and entered the garden. The leaves of the fig tree rustled mysteriously. I stopped for a moment and took a deep breath. Only here, cut off from the outside world, did I notice what a beautiful night it was, and how the wind, if it did not cool me, at least passed over my skin. It even drove the flies away. I looked at the house. All the windows were dark.

I climbed the narrow outside staircase and went into the apartment. And although the garden and the fig tree had already suggested that the place was quiet, only now did I really feel I was in my own place, a state of mind that I always longed for and yet feared.

I lit the oil lamp, carried it over to the upholstered bench, sat down and took my shoes off. I was home. The lamp not only lit the room but warmed it with its flickering light. My secret lover, the widow, had probably been asleep for hours. She had left my meal ready for me in the kitchen. I took the cloth off the top of the pan, dug into it a few times, ate standing up. After that I went into the little annexe beside the kitchen to wash.

All the time that I was scooping up water from the big cask in a bowl and pouring it over myself, I was looking forward to getting into bed with the widow.

The moments just before I did so heightened my arousal. Sometimes I came home late on purpose to feel as I did now: first the silence, the deserted atmosphere of the building, then the woman close to me.

Wet as I was, a towel slung around my waist, I went back to the pan in the kitchen and ate a little more. It was a warm night, but all the same I felt cool air on my skin. I glanced at the living-room, homely in the flickering lamplight, and realized that something else was mingled with my arousal. I knew what it was, but I didn't want to think about that. I was in turmoil, something significant had happened to me, a meeting that was more than I could deal with. I took the cloth right off the pan and put its lid on.

Extinguishing the lamp in the living-room, I stole along the dark, narrow corridor to the bedroom. It was exactly as I had expected; she was fast asleep when I lay down beside her, with the sheet wound around her so tightly that it was quite difficult to get it off. She woke up, and the more I tugged at the sheet, the more firmly she pulled it around her again. I pushed back her dark hair and kissed the back of her neck. I managed to uncover the skin of her back only inch by inch because she kept hauling the sheet back. I knew what she wanted, I was well acquainted with her provocative prudishness. She still went into hiding when I wanted her, as she had on our first night together. By now it had become a ritual, and the thin cover under which she crawled gave me the time I needed. She wasn't retreating from me; the soles of her feet even stroked mine as if by chance. But she wanted to be taken forcibly. Sometimes I wished it wasn't like that, but it excited me. Finally I pulled away the sheet from under her, exposing her, and then came into her from behind. She lay flat and groaned as quietly as if her children were in the room. I just had time to stroke her hair back from her face. She snatched my hand and licked my fingertips, and then it was over.

I liked to lie beside her for a while before I went to my own room. I stared up at the ceiling, breathing heavily, and sensed that apprehensive feeling again. As if someone close to me had died, I thought. The widow turned to me and put her forehead against my shoulder.

“You have a new neighbour,” she said abruptly.

It took me a moment to come back out of my thoughts. “Who is it?” I asked.

She yawned. “That doctor from Europe, the one you work for.”

I was wide awake at once. “What did you say?” I exclaimed.

“They brought his furniture today. I saw it from the roof. He’s living in the house beside the stables. Not particularly elegant, but spacious.”

I couldn’t stay in bed. I forced myself to keep calm and walk quietly as I made my way barefoot into the corridor and went through the dark living-room to the front door. For a moment I wondered whether to put my shoes on, but I was too impatient even for that.

In the cool night air, I hurried along the balustrade to the wooden ladder leading to the roof. Once up there I realized that from the waist up I was naked, and I instinctively hunched my shoulders. But then I saw the large, brightly lit window in the house on the other side of the alley. I recognized the doctor, whom I thought I had left behind me for that day. There he was; it had obviously been another long evening at the hospital. He was standing in the middle of his new living-room, hands on hips, looking around as if in search of something.

I crouched down on the metal roof and folded my arms in front of my chest. Now, alone with him again so unexpectedly, I realized that I wasn’t going to shake this man off, that he and everything he had brought with him would pursue me.

One of the mules must have been left behind somewhere in the stables opposite; it was now evidently wandering around, kicking the wooden walls. I felt the sweat on my skin, and shivered. I sat there like an Indian holy man. Meanwhile, the doctor had begun unpacking crates. He did it quickly, putting all the small items that he fished out of the sawdust and removed from their paper wrappings down somewhere in the room, many of them just on the floor.

Now you’ve arrived, I thought. Now you are setting up home in a foreign country. I unfolded my arms. The sight of the man, who was thin as a rake, made me doubt myself again. He was getting on in years, and he was a doctor from Europe, but that proved nothing. Your memories are deceiving you, I told myself. Just because it’s so long since you saw any Europeans, you think this one must have something to do with that time in the past. Suddenly I felt weak and downcast. All the tension of the last few hours relaxed. I stood up and turned away. Half-naked like the man I saw at the window opposite, I lingered there for a moment, and then climbed down the ladder again.

[The two following chapters of Section 1 describe the narrator Anwar still watching the doctor at work and, from the flat roof, at home, where a younger woman visits him, but leaves after a few days. Then the doctor is visited by another man, a Jew whom Anwar also recognizes from the past and knows as Ephraim. And now he is sure again that the doctor is the man he once knew. The next sample chapter, first in the second section, which is entitled *The Beautiful Houses*, takes us back to the time before World War 2.)

## 1.

I remember that I didn't know what education was before I met educated people. And I remember that the city of Baghdad was small in my childhood. Desert sand covered the suburbs, with their narrow courtyards and dilapidated alleys that looked as if they had been scored into a crust. But there was also the river, and the river seemed to attract everyone to it: the traders who unloaded their cargoes here, the rich who built their houses and laid out gardens on its banks. Foreigners also gravitated to the river. The British built a quarter here, Bataween with its broad, straight streets and three large parks, like the parks in London, and they gave it electricity and genuine postal addresses. But it was the cafés that fascinated me most. They were entirely different from anywhere I had ever known. It wasn't only men who patronized them as they did the Tawla teahouses, where they sat smoking their water-pipes. Women went to the cafés as well, wearing Western clothing and not the *abaya*, talking to the men and laughing with them. They drank lemonade, they smoked and they looked out at the river calmly flowing along. Everyone seemed to have plenty of time, and everyone seemed to be clever. For these people talked all the time, they engaged in lively discussion, and then they all laughed together. Or they played billiards at magnificent tables as large as wardrobes, covered with beautiful green velvet. The sole purpose of these tables was to pass the time by playing a game.

I always wanted to go to these places, I was attracted to such people. And I wasn't the only one. What had we learnt at school? History? That was all far away. History was made in Europe. And here we were lucky enough to have ended up under the roof of that mighty edifice the Empire, built in the past by pale men in white wigs. History, said Ephraim, simply found us and swallowed us up. The British, my teachers and all of those I met later, loved what was very old about this country, things that we had forgotten long

ago. They dug up stone giants, warriors and lions, in whom they saw themselves. They called that our culture.

But at the same time as they were digging these things up they were part of their own world, of the sky that they had stretched above us. At heart, they saw us as mere Bedouin, obviously wandering over ground crammed with treasures. They had to come, in order to create the country where we had been living for so long. They gave it a form, a name and a king. The British mandate in Iraq began with the king. That was in 1921, the year when I was born.

It's a strange idea. I have never connected myself, my own life, with that "history". I took everything that happened to me as a personal matter. Nor did I ever feel the strong national pride that was roused in others who grew up with me. Yet something of it entered into me and took root.

I can't help thinking of my father. I see him before my mind's eye, a small, strong man with ambitious ideas. For him, too, the 1920s and 1930s must have been a time of upheaval. He worked as an overseer at a date packaging works, where he not only shouted at the labourers and clapped his hands but also used a stick on them.

"Organization," he always said, "is the great problem of this country." None of what his son was learning at school seemed important to him. "All we can learn from the foreigners is good order. That's the foundation stone of a modern country. Our own people are uneducated peasants with no idea of what's going on the world. They learn nothing, then they're prepared to do any kind of work, and that's all they think of. When I punish them they seem to grovel and at the same time they're full of hatred. I know exactly what they're feeling. And that's the whole country for you, grovelling and full of hatred."

As if to bring his own dissatisfaction home to me, he took me to certain places with him. These were not the usual family outings when the idea was to find a pretty place by the river and eat a picnic there, or buy a *shaboot*, a Tigris carp, from the fishermen. My father wanted to teach me something.

We went to the tanners' *souk* in a remote part of the city. The stench was unbearable. Barefoot boys worked here, their bodies and clothing covered with dirt and discoloured by the nameless fluids that they used. In an area surrounded by a crumbling, almost invisible wall there were pools as black as pitch with animal skins swimming in them. You might have thought the skins came away from the rotting corpses only in these

pools. My father stopped at one place and drew me close to him. Here, two of the boys were reaching into encrusted buckets and throwing a brown, muddy substance on to an animal skin, then rubbing it in. They were working with human excrement that they had collected earlier from the latrines.

“In Germany,” said my father, “there’s a man who thought about time.”

I was on the point of throwing up. I tried to ignore the buckets and the flies circling over them.

“That’s what the man did,” said my father. “He says that God’s time is not the same as human time. If we could see it from the outside, it would look like a globe. If you can think, you can fly a long way without moving from the spot. Or you can invent machines that really do fly.”

The boys bent over the buckets again and scooped up the thicker remains of the substance from the bottom, just enough for them to rub in without letting it dry too soon.

We also looked at the rich people’s houses, although my father didn’t linger here. He just made me walk past them, as if he wanted his son to feel close to them. And I did, perhaps I was more strongly aware of it than was good for me.

Sometimes, when I looked at my father, I saw him as a figure from a sinister fairy-tale. Once, long ago, he had gone along a dark path, and he brought the memory of it back to my wooden bed, to whisper it into the ear of the boy in the bed, his only son. It ran from his lips like water. I was still a child at the time, and I caught all the drops and made words out of them.

At times, in a few moments and at a few places, you can see those who are dead and forgotten, said my father. The Almighty sets the dead free only briefly, and then he takes them back to him again.

On the road to Aleppo he showed them to my father, who had left the road itself and was wandering among bushes and rocks, because he felt as lonely in the night as the cold rocks and the straggling bushes. And because he was praying for a way through the darkness, since there was no moon, and the wind had blown the stars out and was wandering around like my father himself. Father was crawling over the ground.

“Something looked at me, I’m sure of it, it was out there very close, going ahead of me, waiting. It was leading me on. It was terrible to be alone like that, but necessary, for I was to see something.”

He crawled down into a hollow, the soil between his fingers was dry black dust. The river that ran fast through the little valley left nothing behind it.

Father lay down on its stony bank and looked up at the sky, saw moonlight move behind the clouds, saw it grey and writhing, saw it free itself, and then the stakes rose erect around it. Gradually the darkness spat them out, one after another.

The men were hanging head down, gutted and pierced with large nails. Cold campfires stood all around. Father rose to his feet, retreated, and then saw the women, impaled and hanging in the air, high above rows of children with their heads buried in the ground. Their hands had been cut off and lay in heaps beside them.

“Who were they?” I asked.

“People called Armenians, not from here,” whispered my father.

“Did a ghoul do it?”

“Yes, it was a ghoul.”

“Because they were foreigners?”

“The ghoul knows only foreigners.”

“It was watching you, but it didn’t do anything to you.” I was in tears.

“No.”

“It was afraid of you. Say it was afraid of you.”

“Yes.”

I knew Ezra from Rashid Street, and I had avoided him for a long time. At first I was simply scared of him, because he was two years older than me, and seemed very grown up when he strolled along behind the colonnades and his friends gathered around him. There was no reason for him to notice the Arab boy stealing quietly past him on the way home from school.

He was tall, and very powerfully built for his age. His deep black hair was always a little too long, and untidy; he used it to hide his jug ears. For Ezra was vain, everyone knew that. However, he thought it a very modern hairstyle, he always wore shirt and trousers in the European style, and never had a covering on his head. His family was rich, everyone knew that too.

All the same, he hung about in the streets whenever he could. I was surprised, because you hardly ever saw the rich businessmen’s children around the place. They had

schools of their own, and they also stuck together in their free time. But Ezra was different, and seemed to be both aware and proud of that.

On the afternoon when I finally got to know him, he was sitting on the ground in one of the narrow alleys off Rashid Street, smoking. It looked as if he hidden in order to smoke, but that didn't seem like him. More likely he had chosen this retreat, where remains of vegetables and bits of wood littered the ground, in order to be alone. With his head and back leaning against the wall of the house behind him, he slowly turned his eyes to me as I lingered briefly at the entrance to the alley, having recognized him.

Maybe Ezra was tired of being alone, because he raised his arm and beckoned me over with one languid hand. Clutching my bag of books, I went over to him feeling like a delinquent. There was no reason for me to fear him; we didn't know one another at all. None the less, I thought that there had been some secret connection between us for quite a long time. I had expected and even hoped for this moment.

"What's your name?" asked Ezra, narrowing his eyes as the wind blew cigarette smoke into them. "And what did you learn at school today, Anwar?"

Because I didn't know what to say, and also because I distrusted his strange interest in me, I said nothing.

"A proud boy, aren't you? Not going to answer every silly question. Did they tell you anything about Iraqi independence and the golden age that's ahead for all of us?"

"No," I said, but I did know what Ezra was talking about. The subject was very much a part of the curriculum.

"Give me that," he said, raising his arm.

I was still clutching the book bag to me as if for protection. Reluctantly I relaxed my grip and obeyed.

Ezra snatched it away from me, took his time about opening it, and shook the contents out into the dust. He looked at my textbooks with a wry smile, I felt as if he were looking at me and not the books. It was an awkward situation. I was sure that Ezra was just getting bored sitting here on his own. Now he had found something to do. But then he surprised me. He carefully picked up the books and blew the dust off each of them, one by one, before putting it back in the bag. When he handed it back to me, he gave me a friendly nod.

"Want to see something different some time?" He didn't wait for an answer. "If you have a little time to spare, I can show you."

Suddenly my uncertainty turned to fright. I clutched the book bag again and watched Ezra push himself away from the wall of the house and stand up, with a groan. I took a step back, and by the time the other boy was on his feet, dusting down his trouser legs, I was well on the way to Rashid Street.

Ezra probably watched me go, but he said nothing. I was in flight from everything that was about to happen, I told myself later. In flight back to my childhood, which ended for me then, in the dirty alley that afternoon. Someone must have been present at the beginning of the story. Not my father, with all his ideas of progress. Not the mullah at the Quran school or my teachers. Certainly not my mother, whom I had never known because she died when I was born, leaving me behind, someone superfluous to requirements. There was no one at all close to me. It had to be a stranger who took me to a strange place with him, and Ezra did just that.

On that day I saw my home through different eyes. When I got back, one of my aunts greeted me, as usual, and told me my jobs for the rest of the day. She gave me a shopping list of things to buy. Before my father got home, I was to sweep the courtyard and fix the oven for the flatbread, which was in danger of falling apart. Then there was my school homework to be done. That kept me busy until late in the evening.

When I closed the gate of the yard behind me to go to market, I lingered there for a moment. Through the bars, I looked at the house of my childhood. I saw the small courtyard, the cracked flagstones of the floor, the walls with sand clinging to the gaps in them as if to replace the missing mortar. Then there were the three stone steps that I had so often jumped down, taking all three at once, and above them the kitchen door standing ajar, with defective mosquito wire netting over it, and the bunch of dried flowers that someone had hung there. The long stems and the flowers had taken on the colour of the sand long ago, the wind had blown the bunch out of shape; it clung to the door like a large insect. Beyond it lay the dark rooms of the house. They seemed to me like drawers in an old cupboard that you don't want to open any more. Suddenly my aunt appeared at the window, waving to tell me it was time I set off. I obeyed before I could fit her, too, into the sobering picture before my eyes.