

Sherko Fatah

What You Wish For

[Der Große Wunsch]

Outline + Sample Translation



Novel

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A daughter disappears. A father in despair sets off for a dangerous journey to Syria.

"Sherko Fatah tells the most exciting and tension-filled stories in German literature." FAS

Sensitive and insightful, this is a heartbreaking story set against the backdrop of the conflict in the Middle East.

A daughter has disappeared. She has travelled to Syria to marry a jihadist she met online. Her father Murad blames himself. If he had only told Naima more about his old homeland, which he has left behind mentally, as well as physically; if only he had paid more attention to her feelings of alienation – perhaps then she wouldn't have gone to a strange country in the name of religion. Murad knows he must find Naima. He contacts human traffickers and travels to the Kurdish territory on the Turkish-Syrian border, where he comes face to face with his past. When the traffickers play him an audio diary recorded by a woman in Raqqa – probably Naima – Murad sets out on a perilous journey into ISIS territory...

For readers of Serhij Zhadan, Olga Grjasnowa and Orhan Pamuk.

Sherko Fatah was born in 1964 as the son of an Iraqi Kurd and a German mother. He grew up in East Germany and, in 1975, moved to West Berlin with his family via Vienna. He studied philosophy and history of art. Fatah has received numerous awards for his narrative work, most recently the Großer Kunstpreis Berlin of the Akademie der Künste, the Adelbert von Chamisso Prize 2015, as well as the Aspekte-Literaturpreis for Borderland. His novels have been translated into several languages.

Sample Translation

By Jo Heinrich

Like sparks flying from a torch knocked out of a giant's hand, a trail of stars was scattered across the black sky; they didn't sparkle, seeming only to tremble and fade without ever petering out. Then, very gradually, clouds began to gather.

The path into the valley, towards the vans' starting point, led through the middle of a solitary cloud which seemed to have been left behind in the still pale morning sky. Murad walked downhill through the fog and stared at the sections of damaged road tentatively appearing before him. After a few hundred metres, the milky mass dispersed and in the cool morning light, the mountainside on the left and the ravine on the right came into view. The road was now clearly a protrusion reclaimed from the rock and it was about to vanish into it again. Its edge by the side of the ravine was literally eaten away, and the bite marks offered a view into colourless depths. Scarred with cracks, the road vanished beyond the next bend, only to reappear in the distance, a greyish-white line on the endless mountainside, which from a distance scarcely looked as if it would lead downhill.

Behind him lay the Syrian border: a place in the middle of nowhere, but a place with a notorious name, or at least on the map. Its name had made it worth Murad's trip up here in a van. When he'd arrived, he'd stood before a wooden bridge and watched hundreds of day labourers unloading lorries. Walking one after the other, they carried pipes, boxes and sacks across the bridge and up a grassy ridge. What he could see was a procession of ants, which was orderly despite not following an obvious path. It meandered along, turning steadily. The people weren't walking a trail: they were the trail.

I'm not a tourist, he thought, as if to convince himself. I'm too old for adventures in godforsaken places. Involuntarily he remembered the many stories his father had told him: hiking through the mountains, right here in these borderlands, strange encounters and adventures, some of which must have sprung from the man's imagination rather than having any basis in real experiences. Maybe those old stories had brought him here; maybe he'd subconsciously responded to his father's voice to revisit this far-flung landscape where he was rooted, without really knowing its true meaning. I've come to find my daughter who left Germany to fulfil a crazy dream, he said to himself, aware that taking this trip for that reason alone would have made his father shake his head in disbelief. So long gone and so far away, Murad knew he would have looked at him with those smiling eyes of his, but without being amused in the slightest. He'd been a clever man. Not an intellectual, like the ones Murad had come across later in Europe, but he did have amazing powers of observation. He was familiar with every bird that settled in the fig tree in the garden each summer. Not their scientific names, though – they all had their own names he gave them: Little Hen, Dovelike, Helmethead, or Chatterbox. That in itself wouldn't have sounded so special if it weren't for the time he'd brought home a dead bird he'd found in the road and claimed it was the very same bird that had sat on our windowsill three years earlier. He could identify

it from a bald spot above its eye. I'd have liked to have known how precise that technique of his was, Murad thought. People like to embrace any scientific methods that claim to offer certainty when it comes to stories like that. Especially if they live in the West. But no one can be sure how many of those birds have a bluish-grey spot like that above their left eyes. The doubt over what my father was saying, which for some reason I was aware of even as a child, Murad thought, is as much of a phantom as the hope of any certainty about it.

By the time he'd watched the labourers long enough, the truck that had brought him here had already driven away. He tried to get one of the remaining van drivers to give him a lift. But they all turned him down, maybe fearing they wouldn't make a profit from the trip back at the sight of Murad's clothes, now covered in dust. One of them finally nodded and let him in when he said where he wanted to go. They sat beside one another in silence for a while, Murad gazing at the little plastic shrine on the dashboard, and the charms, garlands and little notes. Then the man announced he wouldn't be going in his direction after all, even though they were on the only road out of there. Murad peered into his impassive face, shook his head, and got out.

He saw the empty trucks passing by on the road. Against his better judgement, he stuck his thumb out, then stepped aside to the very edge of the road. The slope beneath him consisted of rubble and debris that looked like it was left over from when the road was built. It wasn't until much further down that yellowish grass came into view, sprouting from the damp, dark earth. Now it was time to start the descent; the sound of the last truck faded away beyond a few bends that were as yet invisible to Murad. All that remained was the scuffing the soles of his shoes made on the road littered with pebbles and chunks of stone.

On the one hand, he was glad the path was only just noticeably downhill, so he could amble along like someone just out for a walk, and his knees weren't under too much strain. On the other hand, this made him uneasy, because it gave him a rough idea of how far he would have to go. They'd been driving uphill for hours in the dark of the night. Maybe it was down to the truck's age, but he had the feeling the ascent had been much steeper than it looked now. The view into the ravine at the first light of dawn and the pressure in his ears certainly made it clear to him how high they'd come. How many times had the driver touched his forehead and his little dashboard shrine at the sight of a particularly ravaged section of the road? How many times had the view opened out onto the river, visible at night, not a sign of which could be seen or heard up here? It was hard to gauge, but the more instances he could remember when the driver had slowed down to ask for God's blessing for himself, or just for the road to support him, the more Murad feared for his approaching rendezvous with the messenger.

He walked until noon, then had to rest. The sun, shrouded by clouds, hung like a cold, faceless angel over the mud-coloured mountain with its erosion scars. When he looked up, the mountain seemed like the edge of a pit, ready to devour the light up there, just as it had swallowed the last sounds of the vehicles heading off to civilisation hours earlier. He grew colder near the mountainside, so he stayed

by the ravine. He crouched there, but quickly got up again when it occurred to him that his midday fears might come true: it might get dark before he'd gone the whole way.

He trudged on, thinking once more about the messenger. Their rendezvous was a little vague when they'd met weeks earlier; the potential for delay or even a change of plan remained unspoken but inevitable. Nevertheless, Murad was determined to comply with it: precisely because this man was aware of the reason for his trip and the fact that he'd even seen a photo of Murad's daughter Naima on his mobile made him trustworthy. He found himself concentrating on the conversation to come with the man, who surprisingly spoke very good German. At the end of his walk, far down in the valley, he'd meet him, and with him came the hope of seeing Naima again. Murad felt a warmth flowing through his heart at the thought of it, and instantly he was haunted by images of his daughter: her thick dark hair with those strong curls that withstood the wind and even rain as if they were made of wire, and, oddly, her long fingernails; she'd had them done somewhere to look like little works of art. They seemed to be studded with tiny flowers and beads, and decorated with little embellishments. Someone had painted all that on her nails, even the ones on her little fingers, Murad thought, shaking his head as he walked. He found them even more astonishing now than when he'd first seen them, because it seemed so far away from here, as far away as his daughter was.

She's not that far away from you, he forced himself to think. After a flight and an endless bus journey, and now of course this walk, it was precisely this belief that he'd brought all the way with him to the place at the end of the world he was now heading back to after a pointless excursion to the border. Once he'd arrived, a few days before, he left his duffel bag in his room and followed the instructions of an old man who gave him a sullen and curt rundown of the house rules. He insisted that the sewage system had been blocked up for some time. It was fine with 'small things', but the man told Murad to go to the river for 'big ones'.

He was sitting in an alcove of the room, holding a remarkably small, worn-out book which he had been reading tirelessly while shaking his head before Murad spoke to him. Everything all around them was made of wood: the stool the old man was sitting on, the narrow benches, the walls of the room which was a lobby, restaurant and general store all rolled in one, and the staircase leading to the two rooms upstairs. Murad left the building and walked across the street of this vaguely Wild West town to a hill, from where a path led down to the river. A stench rose up from the boulders on the shore. Spurred on by an irrational need to stay clean, Murad went further on to avoid it, but even the path was scattered with heaps in places. At some point, the stench diminished to a mere smell. He climbed down between the rocks to the river and watched the churning water as he relieved himself. The ground everywhere stank; not even the water brought anything resembling respite from the dense, all-encompassing reek. When he'd climbed up the path again and walked back – quite a way in itself – he saw the village schoolhouse, a little set back in a group of trees: a wooden house with no signs of external damage, but dark, as if it were tarnished.

On the road, in the wind which was picking up and the landscape which had remained unchanged since early morning, Murad now realised the hill he could see was the end of his path, and so at that moment his meeting point with the messenger was undeniably tied to it too.

Without a glance at his watch, he carried on walking for what felt like two hours or so. The time on its face had detached itself from the time his steps were taking; a tiny mechanical sound was all that remained of it, and the circle drawn by the metal hands seemed to remain the same whenever he pushed back his sleeve and looked at it, with no advancement or reversal. The landscape was scarcely changing either. The mountain's absurd shapelessness stayed with him like an obsession; he gradually began to imagine he was going blind on the earth-coloured left side of his field of vision. There was a kind of powdery light over the ravine, which obscured everything that might have been visible rather than revealing it.

After another bend, the road now descended more noticeably for half a kilometre, and a splashing sound startled Murad. He walked faster, looking at length for the invisible source of a threadlike waterfall that cascaded down mountain folds and over outcrops, flooding the road to continue its way down over the edge.

The water tasted more of heaven than earth and briefly transformed him into the hiker he hadn't felt he'd been for quite some time. He noticed the mountains on the other side of the ravine now as well. They formed defined peaks and would have been good in a photo album. For a while, he didn't let them out of his sight, which helped him avoid looking at the mass of mountain beside him.

He managed another kilometre or so before giving in to exhaustion, which felt exaggerated as soon as he stopped. Murad squatted at the edge of the road and looked down into the ravine; he almost had a feeling of recklessness. But how reckless could someone from the West be in an area like this, populated by well-organised holy warriors, many of whom had flocked from the West themselves? Most of them, though, were actually war-hardened mercenaries or people who'd been through torture prisons set up by Middle Eastern regimes.

Maybe the messenger was one of them, but maybe he was just a trickster. In any case, the man he now had to cast his mind back to had narrowed his eyes into little slits as he dragged on his cigarette and casually dropped the Jordanian Secret Service prison in Amman into the conversation, claiming the whole world knew of it as the 'fingernail factory'. Murad wondered if he'd just seen too many movies or if he was speaking from experience. He found himself examining his counterpart's fingertips to answer this question.

While the man had talked on slowly, less from thoughtfulness than inhibition, Murad's gaze had fallen on the woman swathed in robes who apparently ran the restaurant where they'd arranged to meet and who would collapse into a chair like a heavy doll whenever there was nothing to do. It distracted him; he felt she was constricted by the dark folds of her robes. And he was startled at the sight of a beggar, wrinkles and deep furrows all over her face, suddenly standing by their table. She was hunched

over, her hands interlocked in front of her chin and her face twisted into a grimace. Murad leaned far back from her. But the messenger fumbled for his cigarettes and gave one to her, prompting her to raise a hand to her forehead. For a moment she looked at Murad expectantly, but then her eyes immediately filled with astonishment. She hunched over as if to fold her shoulders around the cigarette in her hands, turned around and left.

‘You look a bit pale,’ said the messenger, ‘you’re not going to fall off your chair, are you?’

It was a surprisingly perceptive observation, and he wasn’t far from the truth. From then on, Murad was accompanied to the mountain road where he was now resting by a case of diarrhoea so severe it could only be brought under a certain amount of temporary control with the help of a kind of makeshift nappy. Here, alone, he didn’t need to worry about the smell, at least. Nevertheless, with every sudden stomach cramp, he wondered how much of the liquid trickling out of him, or sometimes pouring, as was now happening after a drink from the waterfall, the towel between his legs could still absorb.

The road relentlessly led him alongside the mountain’s flank, and he hoped for another waterfall where he might be able to wash. This hope distracted him from a sky that was gradually turning grey, and from the rocky slopes that were becoming more and more visible on the other side of the ravine. Murad lowered his eyes to the road and the stones scattered over it and, feeling the nappy getting stiffer, hurried on.

After the next bend the road led downhill more steeply. He imagined himself walking and walking for hours and days, his inner thighs rubbed raw, and just then, he heard the splash of water. This time it was pouring directly out of the mountain and seeping away just before the road. He stopped and listened for the sound of an engine. Although for hours he’d been surrounded by nothing but the howl of the wind swirling, as if perplexed, between the mountains, he still felt a car might pass by at any moment.

Perhaps it was simply because the road existed, but he couldn’t help feeling a sense of shame as he undressed. Once he’d taken off his trousers and the ends of the towel slid down around him, he turned away again, just so he wouldn’t seem too absorbed in the idiotic task that lay ahead. His vanity simply refused to let him be seen washing his nappy alone in the mountains as a van drove past him, its occupants – maybe even tourists – more likely to expect the road to collapse than the sight of this before them. Now, carefully pulling out the nappy and holding it away from him like a huge plaster painfully ripped off, for the first time he sensed the vastness behind him, all this pale grey expanse, where even the giant upturned cones of the mountains had space.

He crouched in front of the spring, set one knee against the mountainside to steady himself, and held the towel in the water. It was splattered with reddish-white specks. He shook it out and wrung it, working more thoroughly than he needed to, as if to celebrate rediscovering cleanliness. After washing himself as well, he stood with his bottom exposed, wondering if he could let the towel dry. But a glance up at the sky didn’t bode well. He had to prepare for a tough long trek in the dark, and not even the

stars would light up his path: the milky veil had become a veritable blanket of fog. He quickly put the damp nappy back in place and pulled his trousers on over it. Almost as if his intestines had been waiting for this signal, they emptied themselves with a rumble. Murad set off, teetering uncertainly: as always, it felt as if a huge amount of liquid had left his body, although this was just an illusion.

It was dusk and the road was endless. If it weren't for the two mountains on the other side of the ravine gradually getting further away, Murad could have sworn he hadn't covered five hundred metres. However, the space that now appeared in the ravine didn't give him the view he longed for of the valley, sinking instead into the advancing darkness. The mountain had changed too. A few metres up, large bushes clung to its flank, forming a dark garland that obscured the areas higher up. This garland now stayed alongside him, for as long as he could still see it, at any rate.

He was cold and weighed down with fatigue; a feeling of abandonment seemed to burst forth inside him. I'm going to walk along the one and only road in the place, he kept telling himself, I'll go into the guesthouse, I'll greet the man with the book like one of my nearest and dearest, I'll go to my room and lie on my bunk at long last. Burying a hand deep in his open duffel bag would be enough to make him feel at home. No one, not even the messenger, would be able to wake him, and after a long sleep, the first thing he'd see would be the light through the window, the scattered shabby huts on the hill, which he'd gaze upon as if they were the red roofs of an old and familiar European city.

As he walked, he pondered the strange mark European cities had left on him. With his origins, as a man from what they called the Orient, the impoverished backwater here in the mountains should have been much more familiar to him. But he felt nothing but foreignness whenever he returned to this part of the world. It was probably an element of alienation that his father would never have imagined when he emigrated to Europe all those years before with his young, heavily pregnant wife. But even food and water can become intolerable for the next generation, Murad thought as he let out a little more liquid into his towel with palpable, convulsive bowel movements. Migration changes people, and their children in particular.

Especially as he'd seen this so often, Murad's own daughter's behaviour seemed to him a kind of regression, like a hopeless attempt to return to a world she barely knew. If someone had asked him, he would have been willing to swear that although Naima was still very young, she was a forward-thinking woman about to explore her potential in the Western world. It had now been about ten months since Naima had disappeared the previous summer. When he found out about it through Dorothee weeks later, the story was that she'd gone on a long trip with some new boyfriend or other. That was how she'd announced it to her mother, not expecting any opposition. The trip seemed very important to her, Dorothee said, adding that Naima refused to answer any questions about her new relationship. Murad remembered painfully clearly how convinced he was of the need to give his daughter complete freedom. Naima was an adult, and hard though it might be to accept it, she could start a new life somewhere else if that was what she wanted. The fact that we care about them doesn't

mean they're tied to us, Murad had arrogantly proclaimed at the time. To him, setting off with a new boyfriend on the spur of the moment seemed like an expression of youthful rebellion. And maybe, in a way, he'd also been siding with Naima against Dorothee, in the mistaken assumption that he had to defend her right to break away and be free. But of course, he'd thought he'd see his daughter again after a while.

But there was no contact. Dorothee was more sceptical and became more and more restless over time, until he finally began to take the matter more seriously. At that point, they found out a little more about her new boyfriend, but it was far from enough to appease them. At least there was the occasional post on social media to let them know Naima was still alive. But she didn't answer any of their messages and she wouldn't tell Murad or Dorothee where she was. It took some time for him to feel the need for action. Reporting her to the police as a missing person turned out to be futile. Although they assured him they'd investigate it, they also seemed keen to stress how slim the chances of success were.

And so the wait dragged on and as the winter progressed it became unbearable. Everything changed the day a police officer rang to tell him Naima had left the country for Turkey. He could be certain of this, he said, adding without any further explanation that he was sure Murad was aware that Turkey bordered Syria. At that moment, Murad's mind was filled with a new image of his daughter, suddenly a stranger to him: an image that from then on led to his journey here.

Before that it would never have occurred to him that Naima could be who the media were referring to when they talked about so many young women joining Jihadists who'd befriended them on the internet or somewhere else. Regardless of the details of Naima's transformation, though, even now, here on this mountain road, he wanted to shout out loud that it couldn't be true; what was the point of all those years of school, all the Western liberalism, her short skirts, her make-up and her painted nails, if this here was the end result?

The darkness around him was now so boundless that it seemed to stand in his way physically. His foot hit something solid and he stared at the road, his eyes wide, trying to make out its path. How dark can it get in the fog, between these mountains? he wondered. A side glance still revealed remnants of light; like an oversized ship's bow, another mountain emerged from the darkness. Murad looked down into the ravine. The boulders were softly contoured and grey; further down they dissolved into the shadows, leaving nothing between the mountain and the slope but a black hollow, ripe for a childlike fantasy of a tightrope walk or a jump across the void.

How could Naima, at her age, still believe the world was as harmless and accessible as it seemed in her YouTube videos, where even war was portrayed as a tourist sensation, a sequence of quick shots of explosions and violent scenes alternating with long pans over vast landscapes, all accompanied by music? How could she think she'd find her place alongside an armed foreigner? He was probably a young Frenchman, Murad had found out. But she could have met a young Frenchman somewhere else.

If there was something more to it than just a love affair, he thought, it was probably that she also had a thirst for adventure, a desire to break out of her all-too-familiar, dreary day-to-day life. Could this really be the mundane justification for such a radical step? It was hard for him to see things through Naima's eyes, but as a father he felt he had to keep trying.

Maybe she has a different way of inhabiting the world, he would sometimes tell himself. He himself had travelled widely, and yet it would have seemed strange to him to live in it as she did, inhabiting an entire world that she put together from pictures and her own dreams, but that did not make this world one centimetre smaller or one drop poorer. Only sometimes, in the pockets of memory where buses and trains, boats and maybe even rickshaws were transformed into sequences of images, could he feel a little like Naima, who hadn't yet begun to feel the weight of all these things. But what could he know about his daughter's psyche, when even her mother couldn't manage to explain it?

Suddenly, driving snow began to fall, and large flakes tumbled towards him, forming an unstable tunnel before him. Murad sped up involuntarily, but immediately stopped when he noticed something moving up on the slope. He could barely make out anything up there, but he focussed instead on what he could hear. First there was a tapping and a scratching, before it went quiet, which irritated him even more than the sudden presence of a living being had. He carried on walking. The snow fell silently, interfering with his sense of direction. Ten steps further on, he could clearly hear the sounds again: there was something moving alongside him, up where he'd spotted the bushes. He didn't dare imagine there might be someone there. As he wasn't in a jungle, the thought of an animal felt less of a threat than a human being. He looked out for it, stopped and waited. Whatever it was, it scurried past above him and stopped somewhere ahead.

Now, as he walked on, the landscape had changed without him being able to see it any longer. It was once more the completely cut-off world of scree and fog that for some reason had inspired him to go on this trip, but that was now frightening him. The thing that drove Murad on and at the same time made him so tense that even his diarrhoea came to rest was the certainty that no one would be able to help him, whatever happened from here on. All his forlornness condensed into the sudden realisation that whatever was up there had no trouble following him on nimble feet, and it was there for him alone, and so it lay ahead of him, and him alone. The mountain, which he had been crawling alongside for hours, now seemed to push him away. He crept along the very edge of the road and still felt much too close to the slope. He thought about where he could hide if the thing up there came down. But it was bleakly clear: this road had turned into a trap.

The snow was coming down so hard that Murad would have stumbled into the void if the moon hadn't slowly emerged over the mountain – just a pale spot in the grey-white flurry, but a light all the same, albeit shrouded by a desolate veil. After some time, he could make out the bushes on the slope again, and also the movement in them, very clearly. He walked on robotically, constantly taking care not to

stumble. After his initial fright, he was reassured by the fact that the creature up there was keeping its distance from him.

The blizzard was gradually letting up; the road had become slippery. Murad reached the next bend and a point where the slope had given way. He knew luck was not on his side. Now he'd see what was stalking him: if it wanted to keep going, it would have to come down onto the road. All he could do was go as fast as he could. Half-sliding, arms flailing, he skirted the huge crevasse in the mountain and blindly traced the moonlit fragments scattered on the road. At first, sounds lagged behind him, then they changed.

He didn't want to look back, but an irrepressible, fearless curiosity, an urge that seemed to free his mind from his vulnerable body and its fears, that lived only in his eyes and ears, made him turn round and take a much closer look than seemed possible just then at the big, dark dog rushing out from the mountain and springing up on the shimmering road. The dog trotted off, its muzzle close to the ground. If he caught up now, Murad would have no choice but to run ahead, an undertaking that hardly seemed promising. As if his limbs had turned to wood, he took one step in front of the other and narrowed his eyes.

The road vanished into the darkness after a few metres, and the ravine beside him was bottomless. He looked up the slope and had a vision of walking for hours across someone's huge, ever-changing face, roughly where its lower lip might be.

The dog was clearly keeping its distance, and it became an ogre breathing down Murad's neck. What did he know about animals here, in this place where meeting with humans was so much more in the spotlight? What did he know about animals in general, other than what was on TV? As he hurried on, he remembered the working elephant he'd seen in India years before. It stood in the middle of the road, amongst cars, bikes, donkey carts and people. Its small eyes surveyed the hustle and bustle with an expression of vulnerable patience. Then he thought of the Kali festival and the sacrifices to the goddess of destruction. He'd been so surprised by that bloody cult. He remembered the sheep and goats standing in front of the goddess where they were to be sacrificed, of how the butcher waited with a sword-like knife for the animals' consent; as it was usually a long time coming, they finally had a bucket of water poured over their heads so they'd shake them – a movement that was deliberately misread, resulting in the fatal stroke and yet another gush of blood, which mingled with the flowers blowing around on the hot cobblestones on the square, touched them, encircled them, discoloured them, and finally washed them away. The hands of the people sacrificing and praying touched this stream of blood, which took up their shape and held it for a moment before engulfing their fingerprints, only for them to reappear in a flash on the thirstful goddess's chubby stone face which seemed to smile down on it all with blood-smearred eyelids and lips, as if to say, 'You're next'.