



Source: Sam Ghattas, 'Turmoil as Lahoud walks out',  
*The Sun-Herald online*, 25/11/07.

Tags: [Iraq](#), [Syria](#), [Spain](#), [plants](#), [language](#), [travel](#),  
[violence](#), [storytelling](#)

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In the heart of the garden there was a grove, and in the middle of this grove there was a pedestal, and on the pedestal a figure was poised, leaning forward, about to step down on to the earth. The garden was lush and tropical even though it existed in a desert. It was a paradise, a provisional paradise in the wilderness of this world. He was poised. But first he had to finish the story.

It was a simple story, with a neat ending. It was the story of a tree. A transplanted tree.

Palms are the most cosmopolitan of trees, with a long and sophisticated history of international travel. They are quintessential California. But they are not natives, or at least there is only one species that is native to the region. In the west most palms were brought initially from the Middle East by Arab travellers. Seeds of the date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*) were brought to California from Spain by the Franciscan Padres. At least one palm was planted in each Franciscan mission as a symbol of the Holy land and the fronds were used during the Holy Week ceremonies. It is also probable that they brought the native fan palm in from the desert and domesticated it just as they tried to domesticate the human natives.

Palms are survivors but sometimes they die. And dead palms talk. San Diego 1957: a dramatic death occurs. California's oldest known exotic—a date palm, having lived for more than 180 years, has reached such a height that its life-giving sap can no longer reach the top. So it keels over. According to legend it was planted by Junipero Serra on the site of the original mission in San Diego. Old age, a natural death, hardly dramatic you might think. But listen to this: When taking the palm to pieces, workmen extracted a bucketful of lead from the portion that must have been about man-high from the ground when the bullets entered it. They were American bullets, *circa* 1850, and it is thought that this palm, planted as a holy object, became the backdrop for executions in the heyday of mission life.

He finds that at the end of this story there is another story growing, and so he shuffles on his pedestal, changes feet and resumes his poise.

This is a story about the first Hispano-Islamic estate, Rusafa, outside of Cordoba. It was built by a prince, Abd al-Rahman, in 756 when he was twenty five. Fleeing a coup in which the leading members of his family in Syria and Iraq had been assassinated, he made his way through North Africa to the Iberian peninsula, where he established the Hispano-Umayyad dynasty. He built a palace which he named and modeled after his grandfather's estate in Syria where the prince had lived as a child. Arabic sources describe Rusafa as a beautiful palace with an ample garden stocked with rare and wonderful plants and handsome trees brought from afar. The thirteenth-century historian Ibn Sa'id wrote that Rusafa had beautiful irrigated gardens and that 'Abd al-Rahman had sent a messenger to foreign parts to obtain special plants, so that 'al—Rusafa became famous for the excellence of its plant varieties.' There is a

melancholy poem written by Abd al-Rahman, in which, addressing his favourite tree, he speaks of his yearning and his home-sickness:

*O lovely palm, a stranger thou,  
Like me in a foreign land,  
Here in the West dost languish now,  
Far from thy native strand.*

As he tells this story the storyteller hears his own voice speaking the poignant refrain. It is an English voice, sentimentally anachronistic, almost Victorian in its cadences and rhymes. Actually, he has been reading from a book and as he reads he's both moved and appalled. The book is Mary Louise Gothein's monumental *A History of Garden Art*, written in German in 1913 and translated into English in 1928. Is the poem faithfully translated from her German rendition, or is it anglicised? Was her German rendition anyway faithfully evocative of the original? What was the original like? How much do words retain as they travel? How much do seeds retain and transmit?

He steps down from his pedestal and sets out on a hunt for the original. Or at least for a better translation. After a long hunt and many detours he finds something and returns to his pedestal in order to announce:

*A palm tree stands in the middle of Rusafa, born in the West, far from the land of palms.  
I said to it: 'How like me you are, far away and in exile, in long separation from family and friends.  
You have sprung from soil in which you are a stranger;  
and I, like you am far from home.  
May dawn's clouds water you, streaming from the heavens in a grateful downpour.\**

He is poised to step down, but as he speaks, those words—'streaming from the heavens'—trigger the storytelling impulse. There is more to be found out, another history, another story to tell.

A translation is a transplanting. Of words, yes, but more so of language. The transplanting of a language means the encounter of one language with another, languages separated by time and culture, transformed and renewed by duration and climate, more likely obdurate than hospitable. A good translation bristles, vibrating from the encounter.

You need to resist the temptation to naturalise all foreign languages, to turn them transparently into English. Because that would be the end of the story. You need to find a way to turn English, in the process of translation, into French or Arabic or a thousand and one other languages. You need not to ban the Palm in Southern California to make way for a purely native garden, but to transplant it in a provisional paradise, where it may speak of its bullet-ridden history.

\* D. Fairchild Ruggles, *Gardens, Landscape, and Vision in the Palaces of Islamic Spain*, 2000.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Lesley Stern.*