

Translator's Introduction to "The Inheritance"

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"So they stood, brother and sister, facing one another in that laughable blood mystery..."

¶₁ "The Inheritance" is one of the first pieces of fiction written by Safae el Khannoussi, an emerging talent in the Dutch-language literary world. First published in 2020 in the Dutch literary magazine *De Gids*, the story was later republished in June 2025 as one half of a pocket-sized flipover volume, paired with the short story *De Dobbelaar van Cairo* ["The Gambler of Cairo"]; the publisher, Uitgeverij Pluim, presents this double-gemmed reprint as a "keepsake" for el Khannoussi's fans.¹ Like the stories wrapped within, the physical edition is similarly intricate, with foldout flaps one must open and readjust before reading either of its texts.

¶₂ "The Inheritance" is a compact, triple-framed short story—almost a parable—that unfolds through the reunion of a brother and sister, A. M. and Zohra, who gather to sell a family inheritance: a house on a plot of land in Morocco. It soon becomes apparent that this inheritance reaches far beyond the materiality of land. As each narrative frame shifts in time, perspective, and place, genealogy, bloodline, and—above all—religion come together to provide possible explanations for the state in which house and land are found: abandoned, decaying, and permeated by the stench of

dying livestock, of "diseased beasts that lingered." The setting of an abandoned house under slow collapse, and the anxiety following all the male characters, creates an atmosphere of paranoia, like a crossover between Edgar Allan Poe's stories "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Man of the Crowd." Only Zohra, who appears before her brother, A. M., stripped of gender markers, appears to have agency. Later, at her inherited property, she finds a loaded rifle and retains control over it for the remainder of the story, exhibiting her dominance over her male kin. Even outside the persistent threat of violence, an unease lingers through the text, like the heat that hangs over the parched land that is to be inherited.

¶₃ The novella's central revelation, nestled within the innermost frame, or core story, concerns a discovery of identity that is framed as monumental. But, when this revelation ends and the narrative returns from the testimonial registers of the first-person to a third-person free indirect discourse, the impact of the discovery is muffled from us, the readers. This diluted catharsis is perhaps foreshadowed, already, by the erratic behavior of Zohra, who relieves dying animals of their pain with a firearm ("A shadow crossed [Zohra's] face. Perhaps that's meant for me, thought A. M. A second later, the shot rang out, an ear-shattering bang muffled by its entry to the animal's skull.") The story, thus, sustains a feeling of detachment, a narrative inaccessibility to the in-

1— "Ein kleinoed voor de fans." Trans. Thomas Siemerink. "Safae el Khannoussi. De erfenis," Uitgeverij Pluim, accessed March 17, 2026, <https://uitgeverijpluim.nl/de-erfenis>.

ner worlds of characters, where gestures appear detached from motive, sometimes even volition. Rather than supplying readers with ready-made explanations, el Khannoussi leaves us to interpret the exact importance of fragmentary clues.

¶4 El Khanoussi was born 1994 in Tangiers, Morocco, and moved to the Netherlands at the age of four. She is currently writing a dissertation on prison abolition in the Maghreb at the University of Amsterdam. In the realm of letters, el Khannoussi came to wider prominence with her 2024 debut novel *Oroppa* (Arabic for "Europe"), which received both the Libris Literatuurprijs and the Boon Literatuurprijs—the most important literary awards in the Netherlands and Flanders, respectively. It has since become one of the most-read novels in the Netherlands in 2025 and is being translated into multiple languages. *Oroppa* has been described by critics as a "kaleidoscopic" quest tale of a constellation of migrant vagabonds across Europe and North Africa (<https://www.letterenfonds.nl/en/books/oroppa>). In *De Groene Amsterdammer*, el Khannoussi is said to have created "a world that is one vast, cohesive context, an exquisitely intricate weave of things we artificially separate—East and West, past and present, war and peace."² Yet, despite such cohesion in world-making, el Khannoussi's works are also characterized by temporal confusion and narrative stutter, properties she attributes to a personal philosophy: "I am unable to write in linear narratives and finished characters. I think we humans should stick to the principle that we are always incomplete," she has remarked. This

2— "een wereld die één grote samenhangende context is, een ragfijn vlechtwerk van dingen die we kunstmatig gescheiden proberen te houden - oost en west, vroeger en nu, oorlog en vrede"; Charlotte Remarque, "Opwindend Nieuwe Verhalen," *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 30, trans. Thomas Siemerink (July 23, 2025): <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/opwindend-nieuwe-verhalen>.

commitment to incompleteness is central to "The Inheritance."³ Each of the three frames has a different narrator, and weaves between free indirect discourse, third-person limited omniscience, and the first-person. As a result, at a formal level, the text resists stable orientation—certainly a challenge in the translation process.

¶5 El Khannoussi's sudden popularity in the Netherlands needs to be read in the broader European climate of the past decade, where far-right forces can no longer be viewed as part of a passing populist surge in Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, racism, and xenophobia, but as a durable structure of governance spanning multiple European parliaments. Against this backdrop, el Khannoussi's works offer a creative reworlding of Europe's racialized and non-Christian minorities, challenging cultural narratives that position these communities as external to the European project. More notably through the characters in *Oroppa*, el Khannoussi reminds us that these supposed outsiders have always been an integral part of European society, even when the identity of Europe buckles under the pressures of their inclusion. As she writes: "It would not do justice...to call them newcomers or outsiders, living at the fringes of society. What do we even mean by 'the fringes'? These people are part of society—they are right in the middle of it. They are just far removed from its center of power." Their stories, she argues, form an "alternative archive" of lived experience that remains largely absent from Dutch literature.⁴ In

3— "A Letter from Safae el Khannoussi to Houria Bouteldja," International Literature Festival Utrecht, accessed March 17, 2026, <https://ilfu.com/a-letter-from-safae-el-khannoussi-to-houria-bouteldja>.

4— "Het zou de personages in het boek geen recht doen door te zeggen dat ze nieuwelingen of buitenstaanders zijn, die aan de rafelranden van de samenleving leven. Wat wordt er bedoeld met de 'rafelranden'? Deze mensen maken deel uit van de samenleving, ze zitten er middenin. Ze zijn alleen ver verwijderd van het machtscentrum. Het boek verzet zich ertegen dat

foregrounding these perspectives, el Khannoussi adds new material to an ossified canon, while reworlding center and periphery in the Dutch and European context. Moving between Amsterdam and the Moroccan city of Oujda, "The Inheritance" does this work on a smaller scale. Our hope for English-language readers is that this translation will invite a similarly attentive, questioning mode of reading, attuned to the unresolved and "laughable blood mystery" that binds sister and brother in the text.

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deze mensen vaak gereduceerd worden tot karikatuur, tot object van intellectuele prikkelingen.... Deze mensen bestaan, en hun persoonlijke ervaringen en getuigenissen creëren een alternatief archief dat vrijwel non-existent is in de Nederlandse literatuur. Het is de hoogste tijd dat we er oor voor hebben."; Safae el Khannoussi, "21 Vragen aan Safae el Khannoussi," interview by Ronja Bloot, *De Groene Amsterdammer*, trans. Thomas Siemerink, October 14, 2024, <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/21-vragen-aan-safae-el-khannoussi>.