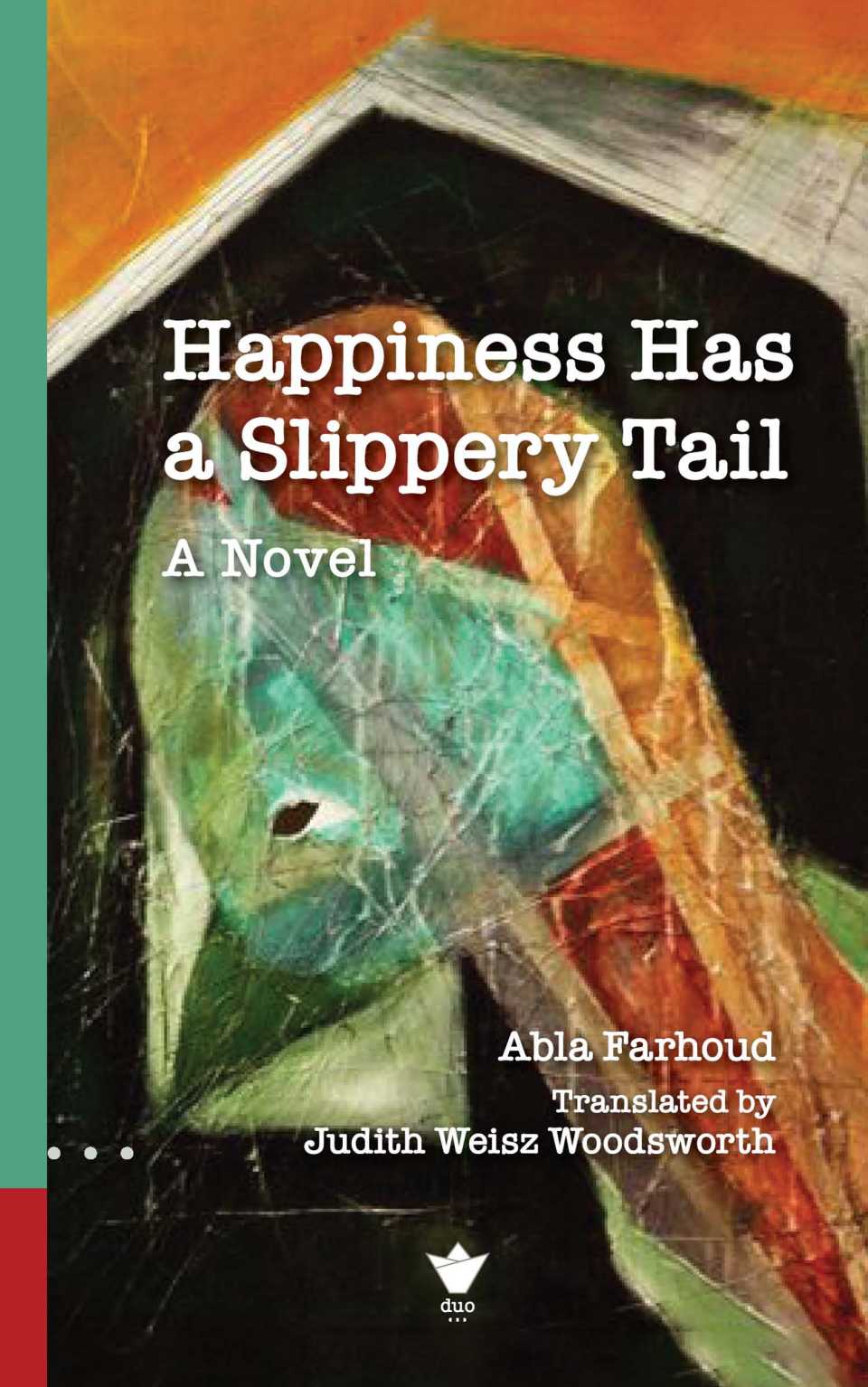


An abstract painting featuring a green and red creature, possibly a dragon or a large fish, emerging from a dark, triangular opening. The creature has a green head with a white eye and a red body. The background is dark and textured, with a green vertical bar on the left and a red vertical bar at the bottom.

Happiness Has a Slippery Tail

A Novel

Abla Farhoud

Translated by
Judith Weisz Woodsworth



Happiness Has a
Slippery Tail

ABLA FARHOUD

Happiness Has a Slippery Tail

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University of Ottawa Press
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Charles Alexis Grenier, *L'Oiseau*, 24 in x 30 in, acrylic on Canvas, 2009.



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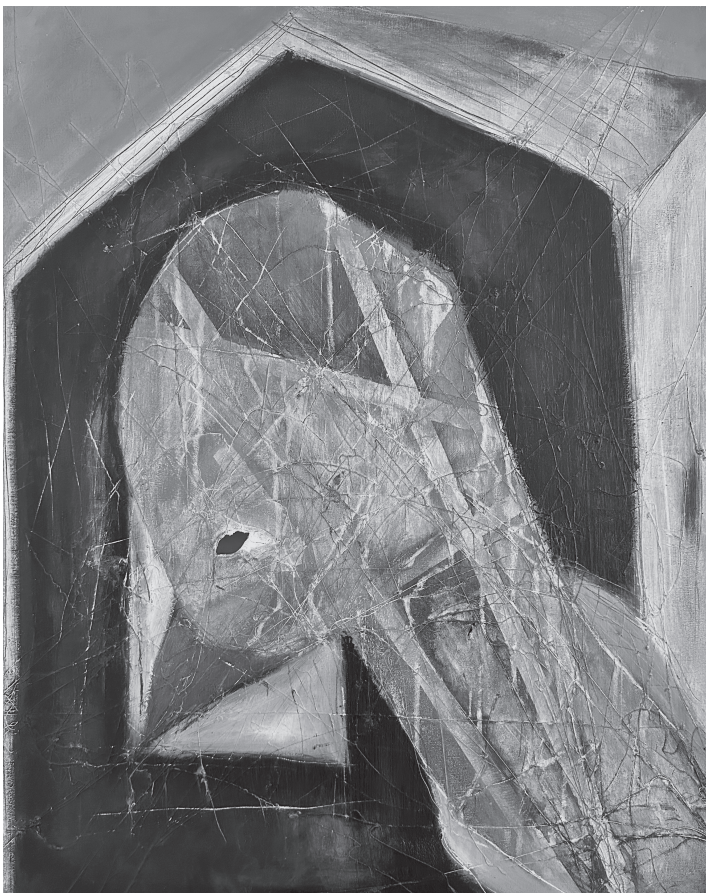
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Charles Alexis Grenier, *L'Oiseau*, 24 in x 30 in, acrylic on canvas, 2009.

L'Oiseau is an exploration of shapes and textures, which come to life through the use of sewing thread and masking tape, to create the image of a bird nestled in its birdhouse.

Grenier has been exploring painting on canvas and the art of collage for over twenty years. His style is based on a cubist approach, where geometric forms and deconstructed perspectives meet to create compositions that are both formal and poetic.

السَّعَادَةُ ذِيلُهَا أَمْلَسُ

Happiness has a slippery tail.

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Foreword

When Abla Farhoud passed away on December 1, 2021, Quebec letters suffered a huge loss. Regarded as a central figure in what has been called *écriture migrante*, literature by and about immigrants, Farhoud was also hailed as a feminist who made women's voices come to life. Above all, she was a gifted writer who addressed universal topics such as love, loneliness, death, and dying. Mainstream Quebec media were quick to react to her passing, and praise for her was glowing. She was commended for her magnificent plays and novels, as well as her skill in imparting "lessons of humanity to her very last breath."¹

Born in the Lebanese village of Ain Hircha in 1945, Farhoud immigrated to Canada with her family in 1951. She developed an interest in drama early on and became a television actress at the age of seventeen. In 1965, her family left Canada and moved back to Lebanon until the civil war drove them to emigrate and leave their homeland for a second time. Farhoud was with them in Lebanon for a short—and unhappy—time and then lived in France, where she studied theatre. She returned to Quebec in 1973. While completing a master's degree at the Université du Québec à Montréal, she wrote her first play, *Quand j'étais grande*, first produced in 1983. After writing several plays and short stories,

she published her first novel, *Le bonheur a la queue glissante* (1998), translated here as *Happiness Has a Slippery Tail*. Further novels followed, all of them delving into the painful and inscrutable push and pull of immigration. Her last novel, *Havre-Saint-Pierre*, was published posthumously in 2022.² She was a finalist for numerous literary prizes and the recipient of the Prix Arletty for the play *Les filles du 5-10-15* ¢, and the Prix Théâtre et Liberté, awarded by the Société des auteurs et compositeurs dramatiques de France, for *La possession du prince*. She is survived by her son Mathieu Farhoud-Dionne, a musician also known as Chafiik, and her daughter Alecka Farhoud-Dionne, a singer-songwriter with whom she wrote songs.

When her debut novel was published in 1998, it was hailed as both fresh and full of wisdom. One reviewer noted: “As Dounia opens the floodgates of her memory and reveals things that have been kept inside for so long, she captivates and moves us with the intensity of her emotions.”³ Critics commented on the author’s ability to give a voice to so touching a character, a woman subjected to the misogyny of her own husband and, indeed, her entire culture. Her work had a far-reaching impact, as the following words suggest:

It’s hard to believe that her grandchildren don’t understand her language. [Dounia] has learned to speak so little that you’d think she was mute. Yet, she moves her lips. You have to come closer to listen. Allow yourself to be drawn in by this faint voice that is like music, with sentences jostling each other, which her writerly daughter attempts to capture as she peppers her mother with questions.⁴

Farhoud was awarded the Prix France-Québec for this novel, which went on to have considerable success, not only at home in Quebec, but abroad as well. Applauded in France, it was subsequently translated into Italian, and has been widely studied in theses and scholarly articles.⁵

Many Quebec authors are well known in English Canada, and the English-speaking world in general, but Farhoud is

not among them. Yet, her delicate and nuanced treatment of exile and immigration, alienation and identity, and mental health issues would surely resonate with readers across multiple communities, in Canada and beyond. There have been some translations of her work. Early on, a few of her plays were translated by Jill Mac Dougall, who also contributed an English translation of excerpts from *Le Bonheur a la queue glissante*.⁶ However, among the novels she has penned, only one has been published in English so far: *Le sourire de la petite juive* (2011), translated as *Hutchison Street* (2018). It is very fitting, therefore, that this seminal novel be translated into English; there is also a case to be made for further translations of her work.

A distinguishing feature of this novel—and one of the most confounding challenges for a translator—is the narrator’s use of proverbs, sayings, and other elliptical, somewhat enigmatic, gnomic expressions that she borrows from Arabic, her native tongue. The proverbs take various forms. Some rhyme in the original Arabic while others do not; some are expressed in classical Arabic while others are drawn from less formal, spoken language, some in the Lebanese variety of Arabic. Farhoud translated the proverbs, which are compiled in the Glossary, at the end of the volume. I have remained relatively faithful to the French version, although in some cases my translations have been adjusted slightly after consulting a specialist in Arabic translation. I have chosen to italicize the proverbs in the body of the novel so as to highlight them and distinguish them from the narrator’s own thought process.

In the original French version of the Glossary, the subtitle of which is “Proverbs or sayings that appear in the novel or inspired the author,” the last two pages list proverbs that do not appear in the novel. It is not clear what the author’s intentions were in including them, but we do learn in the novel that Dounia’s daughter, the writer Myriam, jots down these proverbs in French and collects them. Myriam, we presume, is the alter ego of Abla, who in real life may well have

kept a collection of her mother's proverbs and sayings. The additional proverbs—the last thirteen—were likely part of such a collection and may have inspired her. The proverbs are listed in the order in which they appear in the novel.⁷ However, those that are not explicitly used in the novel have been omitted from the English version of the Glossary.

Language is problematic and acts as a barrier to integration for Dounia, who speaks neither French nor English. There are frequent allusions to her silence and inability to speak. Yet, out of love for her grandchildren, she communicates with them in simple or broken French—all of which I have tried to replicate in the translation. Although they do not speak her language, the grandchildren do use the Arabic word *sitto*, instead of French terms for “grandma” such as *mamie* or *mémé*, which is a source of joy for Dounia. While the story unfolds in French in the original, and in English in the translation, Arabic remains a shadow language, present just below the surface. It occasionally makes its appearance in the form of the proverbs, which are not simply translated but also written in the original Arabic script in the Glossary, as well as in the form of names of people, places, and foods. These references have been maintained in the translation, except that the transcription into Latin script is generally done according to English-language conventions. For example, the name of the sultan “Rachid” is spelled as “Rashid.”

There are other instances of heterolingualism in the text.⁸ The family has emigrated to Quebec, where they settle in a francophone community. They are grateful for the kindness of the host society, personified by the Archambault family, who are regarded as guardian angels. I have attempted to preserve allusions to the French-speaking community and the family's attachment to their new home through the original spelling of French place names, such as Sainte-Thérèse, and by referring to Québécois characters as *Monsieur* or *Madame* Archambault, for example. In one instance, another character is said to repeat the expression, “*C'est donc de valeur, c'est bien de valeur.*” This is something that mystifies

Dounia, who never quite gets it. So, I have left the expression in French, keeping a bit of the mystery for some of the prospective English readers.

Dounia has grown up without knowing how to write her own name and is haunted by her lack of language. Later in life, her grandchildren teach her how to do so. Thereafter, whenever she holds a pencil in her hand, she forms the letters of her name, instead of drawing the birds she so loves to sketch. Quiet, reticent, “mute” Dounia lives in the shadow of her swashbuckling, voluble husband who snatches stories from her, for he can make them far more interesting—even to her—than she could have done. She nonetheless manages to tell her stories, from her youngest days to the end of her life. Her speech has been provided for her, her voice given to her by her ghostwriter daughter Myriam, who one day decides to write a book about her mother.⁹

Dounia is thus the Scheherazade of this story, embodying the age-old tradition of storytelling in the Arab world, captivating and inspiring the reader not only with her personal anecdotes, but also with fairy tales and moral stories that exemplify the rich cultural history of her homeland.

Although written some years ago, in the previous millennium in fact, *Happiness Has a Slippery Tail* remains timely and relevant. Dounia confronts very harsh realities, which she conveys to us unswervingly and poignantly: migration and displacement, aging and loss, conjugal violence and mental illness. Not without pursuing, and sometimes achieving, some degree of happiness, however fleeting.

Farhoud returns to these themes in seven subsequent works, all deeply autobiographical, including one that purports to be an actual autobiography, *Toutes celles que j'étais* (2015), which bears the designation *roman* (novel) on its cover, however, and which she admitted to having fictionalized somewhat. Each of her books examines, to varying degrees, the perspectives of men and women influenced by migration and their quest for identity in a new homeland. Her 2017 novel, *Au grand soleil cachez vos filles*, for example,

returns to the subject of Lebanese immigrants who are drawn back to Lebanon after some years of living in Quebec. Mental illness, too, remains a leitmotif throughout her fiction, specifically addressed, along with the complex relations with other family members, in *Le fou d'Omar* and *Le dernier des snoreaux*. Farhoud's last novel, *Havre-Saint-Pierre*, finally tells the story of her father after a series of novels that began with her mother's story—a perfect bookend to her *œuvre*.

An important presence in Farhoud's body of work is the character of the writer. Writing is a continual search for understanding, as she says in the opening pages of *Hutchison Street*:

My thirst for saying, telling, seeking, understanding, and finding has never been fully quenched. I feel like I'm always missing the point. And so, I begin another book, hoping to find the answer, but without knowing whether I'll recognize it when I see it, and, if I do, how I will put it into words.¹⁰

In *Hutchison Street*, there are actually two writers: the narrator who observes and writes about the inhabitants of her multi-ethnic neighbourhood, Montreal's Mile End, and a twelve-year-old Hasidic girl, who precociously makes sense of the world through the literature she reads—pointedly, the Quebec author Gabrielle Roy—as well as through her own writing.

Never afraid to go to a “dark” place, as her daughter Alecka has said, Farhoud made use of the art and craft of writing to convey her emotions. However bleak her outlook might seem at times, she was a “force of nature,” remaining positive and marvelling at the beauty she saw in everything.¹¹ Abba Farhoud's legacy, in short, is to have illustrated the power of storytelling to bridge cultures, to shed light on the experience of the displaced, lonely, and voiceless, and to foster resilience among those in pursuit of belonging and a sense of home.

Judith Weisz Woodsworth
February 2025

Notes

1. Television anchor Claudine Bourbonnais, quoted by Mario Cloutier, “Abla Farhoud (1945–2021) : L’ultime voyage d’une humaniste en exil,” *La Presse*, December 4, 2021.
2. See “Works by Abla Farhoud” at the end of this volume.
3. Lise Lachance, writing in *Le Soleil* in 1998; my translation.
4. Yves Paré, “L’enfance reste un sujet inépuisable et fascinant,” review of *Le Bonheur a la queue glissante*, *Lettres québécoises* 95 (1999): 31–32; my translation.
5. An excellent example is a portion of the chapter entitled “Abla Farhoud: Montreal Migrations and the Ghost of Lebanon,” in *Indigenous and Transcultural Narratives in Québec. Ways of Belonging* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024) by Dublin-based scholar Dervila Cooke.
6. Abla Farhoud, “Dounia-A-World,” selections from *Le Bonheur a la queue glissante*, trans. Jill Mac Dougall, in *Voices in the Desert: An Anthology of Arabic-Canadian Writers*, ed. Elizabeth Dahab (Toronto: Guernica Editions, 2002), 46–67.
7. In the original, one of the proverbs is out of order; the error has been corrected.
8. Literary scholar Rainier Grutman coined the term in *Des langues qui résonnent : l’hétérolinguisme au XIXe siècle québécois* (Montreal: Fides, 1997).
9. Cooke, “Abla Farhoud,” 102.
10. Abla Farhoud, *Hutchison Street*, trans. Judith Weisz Woodsworth (Montreal: Linda Leith Publishing, 2018), 5.
11. Conversation with Alecka Farhoud-Dionne, February 5, 2025.

Acknowledgments

Not long after *Hutchison Street* was published, Abla Farhoud suggested that I translate *Le bonheur a la queue glissante*. She was particularly fond of this book, which she said was her bestselling one. I would like to express my deep appreciation to Lara Mainville, director of University of Ottawa Press, whose response to my proposal to translate Farhoud's first novel was overwhelmingly favourable, and to Acquisitions Editor Mireille Piché, who greeted the project with boundless enthusiasm. I am indebted to the production team, as well, for having expertly guided the manuscript through the ensuing stages of publication. I also acknowledge the generous funding provided by the Canada Council for the Arts. Abla's children, Mathieu and Alecka, have been supportive and cooperative in this venture. Alecka also welcomed me into her home for a fascinating conversation over a robust cup of coffee and greatly enriched my knowledge of her mother, of whom she was deeply proud. Huge thanks go out to Michelle Hartman, professor of Arabic literature at McGill University, who gave generously of her time to help me with references to Arabic culture, the proverbs, and the use of the Arabic language in the novel. The memory of my parents, who, like the Farhoud family, came to this country without money or language, has been an inspiration and a



Abla Farhoud's classic first novel brings the Lebanese immigrant experience in Quebec to life through the story of a mother, Dounia, raising her French-speaking children in a new culture. This sensitive rendering of the novel in English translation allows Dounia's story to unfold with dignity.

– Michelle Hartman, Professor of Arabic Literature at the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University

This novel paints the portrait of a Lebanese family that has settled in Montreal. The central figure is Dounia, a 75-year-old mother and grandmother. Hers is a story of loss—she first leaves her own village to live in her husband's hometown, and then is wrenched from her homeland, not once but twice, to live in a strange land whose language and customs are foreign to her.

Dounia can neither read nor write, and she speaks only Arabic. Illiterate yet perceptive, nourished by Lebanese proverbs and pearls of wisdom, she has a unique and captivating voice. She struggles, yes, but manages to achieve fulfilment in her new world: "My home is where my grandchildren are, clinging to my neck, calling me *Sitto* Dounia [...] in my language. I want to die where my children and my grandchildren live."

Abla Farhoud was an actor and playwright before becoming a novelist in 1998 with the publication of this novel, the French title of which was *Le bonheur a la queue glissante*, awarded the France-Québec—Philippe Rossillon Prize. Other novels followed, including *Le Sourire de la petite Juive* (published in English as *Hutchison Street*), *Le dernier des snoreaux*, and the posthumous book *Havre-Saint-Pierre*. Abla Farhoud passed away in 2021.

Distinguished professor emerita of translation, **Judith Weisz Woodsworth** was the recipient of the 2022 Governor General's award for French-English translation.

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