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My thesis is a study of the history, theory, and practice of translation. It includes an introduction to the thesis, written in French, a translator's preface, written in English, and a translation from French to English of *Nouvelles d'Algérie*, a collection of short stories written by Algerian writer Maïssa Bey. The stories are fictional, but take place during the time of the Algerian Civil War in the 1990's.

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L'HISTOIRE, LA THÉORIE, ET LA FONCTION DE LA TRADUCTION :
NOUVELLES D'ALGÉRIE DE MAÏSSA BEY

By

KAYLA FRANCES SERVIN

Professor Brian Martin, Advisor

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
Of the requirements for the
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in French

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INTRODUCTION

Ce mémoire se compose de trois parties. Cette introduction est la première, dans laquelle je présente et j'analyse ma recherche sur la théorie, l'histoire et la fonction de la traduction. Je discute aussi les implications morales de la traduction, et le choix que font certains auteurs d'écrire dans une langue ou une autre. La deuxième partie est ma préface de la traductrice, pour ma traduction de *Nouvelles d'Algérie* de Maïssa Bey. Cette partie est écrite en anglais parce qu'elle est liée à et destinée aux lecteurs anglophones. Dans la préface, je présente de Bey et l'époque dans laquelle *Nouvelles d'Algérie* se trouve : la guerre civile en Algérie pendant les années quatre-vingt-dix. Puis, j'explique mon propre style de traduction, et je donne des exemples du texte qui m'ont créé des difficultés particulières. Enfin, la troisième partie de mon mémoire est ma traduction de *Nouvelles d'Algérie*.

Dans ce mémoire, j'examine trois questions centrales : pourquoi la traduction, comment la faire, et à quoi cela sert ? De plus, je pose ces questions plus complexes : Est-ce qu'il y a de l'écriture qu'on ne peut pas traduire ? Comment est-ce qu'on peut évoquer les mêmes émotions, effets, et pensées en deux langues différentes ? Est-ce que tout le monde partage les mêmes expériences et émotions humaines, ou est-ce que ces expériences et émotions changent avec la langue qu'on parle ? Si la traduction parfaite est impossible, à quoi sert la traduction ? Finalement, je m'intéresse aux questions posées par Tejaswini Niranjana, spécialiste de langue et de traduction, et professeur des études culturelles : « How does one represent difference without privileging the role

of the western intellectual or the post-colonial intellectual ? How can we extend the meaning of representation while calling it into question ? » (169).

Pour moi, la valeur de la traduction est bien évidente. C'est avec la traduction que l'on peut partager la littérature du monde entier, qu'on peut voir d'une façon personnelle les histoires, les vies, les expériences, les souffrances, et les triomphes des autres. La traduction est au centre de la communication universelle. Mais, dans un monde où la technologie avance rapidement, où on peut copier et coller une page (ou même un livre entier) dans une boîte à *Google Translate* et obtenir une traduction approximative dans plusieurs langues dans un instant, il faut analyser soigneusement les raisons pour lesquelles la traduction humaine est plus importante aujourd'hui que jamais. Quand on me demande ce que je fais pour mon projet du mémoire, j'explique que je traduis un livre du français à l'anglais, et on me dit, « Mais pourquoi passes-tu tout ce temps en faisant quelque chose que l'internet peut faire dans un instant ? » Voici une question sur la valeur de la traduction humaine à laquelle je réfléchis : qu'est-ce que les êtres-humains peuvent faire que la technologie ne le peut pas ?

La technologie continue à développer, mais la langue sera toujours caractérisée par des nuances subtiles qu'on ne peut pas facilement codifier. Les différences minuscules entre des synonymes presque pareils, les doubles significations et leurs connotations, le ton des voix, les sentiments et l'esprit qui produisent les mots sont tous fondamentalement humains. Un bon exemple de cela est le titre du roman *L'Assommoir* (1877) d'Émile Zola qui brasse un portrait de l'alcoolisme et la pauvreté d'une femme misérable qui s'appelle Gervaise à

Paris pendant le Second Empire (1852-1870). Le mot « assommoir » est un mot complexe. Dans le roman de Zola, « L'Assommoir » est le nom d'un bar et le mot *assommé* peut dire *ivre* ou *saoul*. Mais ce mot a aussi la connotation de *battre* ou *d'être battu*, comme les hommes violents dans ce roman qui boivent trop et qui battent leurs femmes, comme Gervaise. Selon Sandy Petrey, un théoricien de la littérature française et comparée, « The word *assommoir* comes from the standard French *assommer*, meaning to knock cold. But the noun form was strongly marked as popular speech, and the novel applies the term to so many different things that it loses any capacity for what should theoretically be objective naturalist notation » (779). Ce mot pose une problématique que la technologie ne peut pas facilement éclaircir.

Je présente maintenant une histoire brève de la théorie et l'usage de la traduction. Pendant l'époque romaine et jusqu'à la Renaissance, la traduction était utilisée comme un outil pour le traducteur et ses propres bénéfices. Rainer Schulte et John Biguenet, deux spécialistes sur la traduction, adressent cette idée dans leur collection des essais des théoriciens, *Theories of Translation : An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*. Selon eux, Saint Jérôme (347-420 AD), un traducteur et un théoricien qui a traduit la bible du grec au latin, croyait qu'il était en compétition avec l'auteur originale, et comme résultat il a traité sa traduction de la bible comme une amélioration de l'écriture de l'originale (2). Cette époque est décrite par Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) : « In those days, indeed, to translate meant to conquer – not merely in the sense that one would omit the historical dimension but also in the sense that one would add a hint of

contemporaneousness to the material translated and, above all, in the sense that one would delete the name of the poet and insert the translator's name in its place" (Schulte et Biguenet 69). Autrement dit, la traduction n'était pas employée pour la communication globale, mais pour l'exploitation des auteurs. On a pris des éléments de la langue originale, on les a améliorés, et on les a appliqués dans sa propre langue pour l'enrichir.

Avec la Renaissance, l'exploitation a continué. Selon Schulte et Biguenet, "Translators during the Renaissance period explored the possibilities of how linguistic structures from another language could enrich their own" (3). Cette vue sur la traduction et le désir de vaincre une œuvre n'a pas commencé à diminuer jusqu'au milieu du dix-huitième siècle. Ce changement a été initié par des écrivains comme Denis Diderot (1713-1784) et Jean-Baptiste le Rond d'Alembert (1717-1783), deux théoriciens et philosophes qui ont introduit l'idée de respecter la langue, l'œuvre et l'auteur originale, et le désir de s'adapter à ce texte original (3). L'idée centrale de la traduction avait changée de la compétition au partage. À ce moment, trois formes de traduction commençaient à apparaître dans le monde littéraire. Selon le poète, critique, et traducteur anglais, John Dryden (1631-1700), ces trois formes sont : la « métaphore », qui décrit une traduction littérale, mot par mot ; la « paraphrase », qui est moins stricte que la métaphore mais qui respecte toujours l'auteur ; et « l'imitation », qui veut dire une traduction libre qui permet l'interprétation du traducteur (17).

Wilhelm von Humbolt (1767-1835), un théoricien et philosophe prussien, discute les difficultés à capturer « l'esprit » d'une langue, puisqu'aucune langue

est entièrement pareille à une autre : « Each language expresses a concept somewhat differently, placing the nuance in each instance one step higher or lower on the ladder of perceptions” (Schulte et Biguenet 55). Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), un philosophe allemand et un spécialiste de la traduction, décrit la traduction d’une façon similaire. En discutant sa propre stratégie de traduction qu’il appelle « paraphrase », Schleiermacher explique que chaque langue a son propre esprit, et il emploie cette idée de l’esprit d’une langue pour examiner la traduction des sentiments et des émotions. Il dit, « For when we feel that in our mouth the same words would have an entirely different meaning, or here a stronger or there a weaker weight than in his [l’écrivain original], and that we would use quite different words and phrases if we wanted to express in our way the same things he meant to say, then it seems, as we define this feeling for ourselves more closely, and as it becomes a thought in us, that we translate » (Schulte et Biguenet 37). Schleiermacher croit que la tâche la plus difficile pour un traducteur est de produire le sentiment de l’étranger, sans rendre la traduction mal à l’aise. Autrement dit, il faut que le traducteur trouve un équilibre entre le sens étranger de sa traduction et son sens littéral.

À la question sur l’utilité et même la futilité de la traduction, Schleiermacher écrit : « The translator can offer them nothing but his language, which nowhere quite corresponds to the other, and himself, whose interpretive understanding of his writer is now more and now less clear, and whose appreciation and admiration of the writer is now greater, now less. Does not translation, considered in this way, appear a foolish undertaking?” (Schulte et

Biguenet 40). Cette question sur la traductibilité continue à être la focalisation des problèmes et défis de la traduction jusqu'au moment présent.

Par contre aux analyses de Van Humbolt et Schleiermacher, Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) n'était pas convaincu de l'idée de « l'esprit » d'une langue. Selon lui, « It is when the translator sets out to render the 'spirit' – not the textual sense – that he begins to traduce his author. The clumsiest literal translation is a thousand times more useful than the prettiest paraphrase » (Schulte et Biguenet 127). Pour Nabokov, ce qui est essentiel est d'être fidèle au texte original, sans aucune interprétation personnelle.

Ces questions sur la traductibilité persistent avec les théoriciens contemporains. Dans son livre, *The Translation Zone : A New Comparative Literature* (2005), Emily Apter, une théoricienne et professeur de littérature française et comparée à New York University, explique que les deux points de vues principaux qui dominent dans la théorie de la traduction sont : “‘Nothing is translatable’ and ‘Everything is translatable’” (8). Bien sûr, il y a des perspectives entre les deux, où la traduction est nécessaire mais loin d'être parfaite, comme l'explique Sandra Bermann, professeur de littérature comparée à Princeton, spécialiste de la traduction, et l'éditrice de l'essai *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation* :

Impossible yet necessary, translation inevitably entails a loss as well as a gain. Loss is nowhere more evident than in translation's nostalgia for an original it can never fully render, nostalgia, that is, for a singular textual body it can

never appropriate or recreate. A translation can at best inscribe a subsequent understanding, detailed in a new language that can never repeat the original but, at the most, touch it from the point of a tangent, allowing it to live into the future along a new and different line (262-263).

Selon le traducteur et théoricien américain Lawrence Venuti, une traduction proche n'existe pas : « A translation is never quite 'faithful,' always somewhat 'free,' it never establishes an identity, always a lack and a supplement, and it can never be a transparent representation, only an interpretive transformation that exposes multiple and divided meanings in the foreign text and displaces it with another set of meanings, equally multiple and divided » (8). De façon similaire, Lynn Vission, une théoricienne contemporaine de la traduction, écrit : « Words that characterize the life, culture, and historical development of any given country often have no precise equivalents in other languages » (Bermann 57). Si cela est vrai, on pourrait dire qu'il y a des expériences, des idées, ou des pensées que l'on veut exprimer mais qui sont impossibles en français. Autrement dit, il est possible que les expériences humaines soient différentes selon la langue dans laquelle elles sont exprimées.

Lydia Davis, la traductrice américaine qui a traduit Proust et Flaubert parmi d'autres, croit que la traduction la plus proche possible est le mieux. Pour elle, il faut maintenir le texte original : elle n'ajoute rien et ne supprime rien dans ses traductions. Dans une liste de règles qu'elle a créées pour la traduction, elle explique : « The second 'rule' of close translating would be not to add any

material that is not in the original...The third rule would be not to subtract anything from the French, especially by condensing » (« Loaf » 63-64). Dans sa proximité à l'original, elle essaie de reproduire le son, la structure, et même l'orthographe du français dans ses versions en anglais. Elle utilise l'étymologie des mots pour chercher des mots anglais qui partagent une dérivation avec le mot français, et elle considère minutieusement chaque synonyme possible : « See if you can include three words beginning with the letter 'p' in the last phrase of the paragraph. See if, for *oiseuse*, you can find a word in English beginning with 'o' and ending in the -z sounds that means the same thing and, if possible has the same derivation » (59). De plus, Davis essaie de reproduire la répétition dans l'original, et elle suit la ponctuation de ses textes originaux.

Davis considère même la fréquence des mots en anglais et leur reconnaissance générale. En discutant ses propres règles de traduction, elle explique un problème frustrant que j'ai souvent confronté : parfois, elle hésite d'utiliser des mots équivalents ou apparentés quand ils ne tiennent pas le même poids, ou quand le mot anglais n'est pas assez familier aux lecteurs. Elle écrit : « Although they are the same words and mean just what the French means, they are so unfamiliar to a reader that they may express very little » (63). Davis n'aime pas les changements subtils, ou bien moins subtils, que font beaucoup de traducteurs pour rendre un texte plus acceptable, confortable, et familier au public anglophone. En somme, Davis résume sa technique de traduction ainsi : « In the course of a translation, as you explore all the possibilities before making a final decision, you go a considerable distance in a circle before ending up not far from

where you started– but much better informed » (70). Davis est, pour moi, la définition d'une traductrice proche. En essayant de suivre le style d'écriture de l'auteur original (sa grammaire, sa ponctuation, le son des mots et leurs quantités), elle est précise. Pour ce mémoire, j'ai beaucoup étudié Lydia Davis et son travail comme traductrice et elle a inspiré une grande partie de mon propre style dans ma traduction de Maïssa Bey.

Parmi ces questions sur la technique de la traduction, considérons aussi ces questions sur la moralité de la traduction : est-ce qu'on *peut* traduire ? Et est-ce qu'on *doit* traduire ? Il ne faut pas oublier les complications éthiques créés par la transformation d'un texte d'une langue à une autre, particulièrement une langue avec une histoire de domination et de colonisation comme l'anglais et le français. Dans ce sens-là, la traduction crée une contradiction morale : elle permet l'accès aux voix qu'on ne peut pas lire autrement, mais elle contribue à l'effacement des langues minoritaires (Apter 4).

Ce phénomène de l'effacement linguistique est un grave problème en Algérie, et en fait en toute l'Afrique du nord où le français est la langue coloniale, imposée par les étrangers. Pour plusieurs auteurs algériens, la langue arabe a un rôle secondaire après la langue française. Pour les auteurs maghrébins que j'ai étudiés, leur relation entre ces deux langues, le français et l'arabe, est complexe. Maïssa Bey écrit exclusivement en français parce que la langue française a été introduite (pour elle et beaucoup d'Algériens) comme la langue pédagogique et littéraire, tandis que l'arabe est plutôt la langue orale. Par rapport au français, elle dit : « C'est dans cette langue que j'ai appris à lire... À lire en français puisque

l'enseignement était, à cette époque-là, l'époque coloniale, donné en français. C'est dans cette langue que j'ai découvert le monde, les hommes et la littérature » (« À Contre-Silence » 13). Pour Bey et d'autres écrivains algériens, le français n'est pas toujours naturel comme langue littéraire, ou langue d'expression.

Selon Lise Gauvin, une écrivaine et critique québécoise, la romancière algérienne Assia Djébar, qui écrit exclusivement en français, décrit le français comme une espèce de déplacement : « Écrire en français sur ma propre vie, c'était prendre une distance inévitable » (Gauvin 24). Pour Djébar, Bey, et beaucoup d'autres écrivains algériens et maghrébins, écrire en français était tout simplement plus pratique. Après la période coloniale en Algérie (1830-1962), publier en arabe est devenu beaucoup plus difficile. Le français a été souligné à l'école et dans les grandes institutions, et les Arabophones ont commencé à perdre leur arabe écrite. Mais la domination du français n'était pas unique pour l'Afrique du nord.

Pour d'autres écrivains dans le monde francophone, comme le Haïtien, René Depestre, écrire en français a servi comme une sorte de résistance : « J'ai eu le sentiment, quand je me suis remis à l'écriture, que j'écrivais *contre* le français. Je livrais une sorte de bataille décoloniale à la langue française. Mon combat anticolonialiste utilisait les armes de l'adversaire négrier pour essayer de le battre sur son propre terrain, avec ses mots les plus intimes » (Gauvin 89-90). Depestre évoque une sorte d'appropriation à l'envers. En s'exprimant en français et en partageant ses expériences personnelles ainsi que sa voix, il réalise une appropriation de soi-même : il résiste la langue française en l'acceptant. Il utilise

la langue qui l'opprime pour faire entendre sa voix, et pour communiquer sa résistance.

De façon similaire, l'écrivain tunisien, Abdelwahab Meddeb, décrit sa propre résistance à travers la langue française. Selon lui, « L'écriture française nous 'livre' à l'autre, mais on se défendra par l'arabesque, la subversion, le dédale, le labyrinthe, le décentrage incessant de la phrase et du langage, de manière que l'autre se perde comme dans les ruelles de la *casbah* » (Venuti 123). Meddeb lutte brillamment à créer un métissage entre les deux langues. Cette idée d'adopter le français d'une façon personnalisée qui intègre des aspects de sa propre langue n'est pas rare. L'écrivain algérien, Rachid Mimouni, emploie cette stratégie aussi. Dans son écriture en français, « Il y a certaines expressions, certaines formes, certaines tournures de phrases françaises qui sont influencées par l'arabe... par exemple, le fait de commencer une phrase en français par un verbe vient de l'influence de la langue arabe, les phrases commencent normalement et généralement par le verbe et ensuite vient le complément » (Gauvin 116).

D'une façon similaire, le poète et romancier marocain Tahar Ben Jelloun discute ses difficultés en s'exprimant précisément en français. Pour Ben Jelloun, tandis qu'en arabe on a besoin d'un seul mot pour exprimer une idée précise, « en français vous avez besoin d'une phrase entière pour rendre la même idée. C'est la richesse de la langue » (Gauvin 130). En même temps, Mimouni croit que « On a le sentiment d'un malaise parce qu'on n'arrive pas à exprimer quelque chose qui est au fond de soi...il faut essayer d'opérer ce passage vers le français, mais j'ai le

sentiment que le mot arabe contient plus de chair » (115). Les expériences de ces écrivains montrent les nuances subtiles des langues. Si les écrivains bilingues traversent des difficultés en traduisant leurs pensées d'une langue à une autre, comment est-ce que l'internet peut le faire ? On voit ici l'importance du poids des mots, leurs différentes valeurs, et leurs significances cachées auxquelles on doit réfléchir et qu'on doit réexaminer dans la transformation d'un texte à une autre langue.

Il faut aussi qu'on reconnaisse ses propres préjugés, ses faiblesses, ses influences culturelles, et se rendre compte que tout le monde interprète et comprend différemment un texte, une phrase, et un mot. Comment est-ce qu'on peut bien traduire des sentiments douloureux et complexes, comme l'on trouve dans les textes de guerre tels *Nouvelles d'Algérie* de Maïssa Bey ? Selon Emily Apter, « War is... a condition of nontranslatability or translation failure at its most violent peak » (16). Le grand défi de la traduction est alors de traduire d'une façon fidèle au texte original mais aussi d'une façon puissante pour le lecteur étranger. Avec *Nouvelles d'Algérie*, je cherche à traduire l'intraduisible.

Je suis de l'avis que la traduction humaine est absolument essentielle, même si elle n'est pas parfaite. Cependant, j'ai réfléchi tout au long de ce projet aux implications, aux conséquences, et aux problèmes culturels de la traduction. La plupart des aspects négatifs de la traduction vient de ce désir de corriger et améliorer l'originale. Selon Tejaswini Niranjana, « In creating coherent and transparent texts and subjects, translation participates – across a range of discourses – in the *fixing* of colonized cultures, making them seem static and

unchanging rather than historically constructed » (3). À mon avis, il faut absolument éviter cette destruction des cultures avec la traduction, qui peut créer une dichotomie impossible : d'une part, la possibilité d'effacer et supprimer les langues minoritaires, tandis que d'autre part l'ouverture aux langues auxquelles on n'aurait pas accès autrement. Je crois qu'une traduction proche, fidèle, et soigneuse a le pouvoir de nous ouvrir aux autres mondes littéraires et culturels sans leur faire du mal. Cela est ce que je cherche à faire avec ma traduction de *Nouvelles d'Algérie* de Maïssa Bey.

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

Born in 1950 in Ksar el-Boukhari, Algeria, Samia Benameur, known by her penname Maïssa Bey, grew up in an era characterized by conflict and colonial domination. She lived through arguably the most formative time in Algeria's history, from the War of Algerian Independence (1954-1962) to the Algerian Civil War (1991-2002). In 1954, the National Liberation Front (FLN), the main nationalist movement in Algeria, launched attacks on the French army throughout the country, beginning what would become the War of Independence. This war continued until 1962, when Algeria finally achieved its independence as a nation after 130 years of French colonial rule (Martinez Ch. 1). However, a number of factors came together which lead to the complex beginning of the Algerian Civil War only 30 years later, including the Iran Iraq War (1980-1988), the Palestinian conflict and its lack of resolution, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the collapse of the single party system in 1988, increasing social inequalities, and the emergence of a new role for religious discourse within the political realm (Stora 202-205).

The Algerian Civil War can best be understood as a response to the fall of the hopes of Pan-Arabism and the FLN, and thus the rise of the most promising competing factor, Islamism and the militant Islamic Salvation Front (FIS).

Algerian history scholar Benjamin Stora describes this compensation for the crisis in Arab nationalism: "The rise of Islamism, experienced as the hope for a return to ethics, in combination with the bankruptcy of the single-party system, brought about a need for individual responsibility, which would go hand in hand with the

search for a new kinship” (202). Uprisings began in 1988, and after the FIS won the 1991 elections by a landslide, the Algerian army launched a coup d’état to negate the victory. The bloody civil war saw horrendous violence and extreme civilian abuse, and continued until roughly 2002. Death toll estimates vary, but according to one leading scholar and researcher of Algerian politics, Luis Martinez, the war claimed between 100,000 and 200,000 lives (x).

Referred to by some as “The Dirty War” (in French, “La Sale Guerre”), The Algerian Civil War is rarely discussed and often forgotten by the Western public, as the outside media’s portrayal of the war showed only nameless, faceless victims and senseless, reckless violence. The scholar of Algerian history, Neil Grant Landers, describes the mass media’s depiction of the civil war as being “Composed of anonymous atrocities and question marks. Massacres and assassinations were described as effects without known causes, a spectacle of bloody corpses without explanation” (1). Stora describes the political climate during this decade as being dictated by a “culture of secrecy” (235). With *Stories of Algeria* (1998), Bey combats this erasure of Algerian identity. Each of her stories gives voice and power to an individual, and through each narrator she demonstrates the degree to which the violence and oppression of war and occupation have so deeply and permanently penetrated every element of Algerian life.

Maïssa Bey lived her entire youth over the backdrop of these conflicts. Alison Rice, a Professor of French and Francophone Literature at the University of Notre Dame, describes Bey’s assessment of colonial domination in Algeria as

“the determining factor in her life... it is what has provided her with a worldview and given her direction” (49). She witnessed her father’s arrest and subsequent murder when she was only six years old and lost all three of her brothers to violent conflict. In her article on Bey, Suzanne Ruta, an Algerian scholar, translator, and literary critic, summarizes that Bey’s early exposure to the realities of war has had an undeniable influence on her work (16). However, Bey’s writing never expresses hatred or direct anger at her oppressors, or even at the French language in which she writes. In an interview with French language and literature scholar Martine Marzloff in 1993, Bey reveals that her mother, “Despite all her suffering... did not raise us in a culture of hatred for France and the French” (Ruta 16). The primary enemy she portrays in her work is war itself.

Bey began her writing career with her first novel, *Au Commencement était la mer*, in 1996, and published *Nouvelles d’Algérie* only two years later in 1998. Her body of work also includes several other novels: *Cette fille-là* (2001), *Entendez-vous dans les montagnes* (2004), *Sous le jasmin la nuit* (2004), *Surtout ne te retourne pas* (2005), *Bleu, blanc, vert* (2006), *Pierre, Sang, Papier ou Cendre* (2008), *Puisque mon Coeur est mort* (2010), and *Hizya* (2015), as well as a volume of poems, *Sahara, mon amour* (2005), and the essay *L’une et l’autre* (2009). Bey is a mother of four, and currently lives and works as a French teacher in western Algeria. She is the cofounder of Chèvre-feuille étoilée publishing, and the president of an Algerian women’s association called “Paroles et Écritures,” which she founded in 2005 (“Maïssa Bey”).

Bey was forced to take on a penname for her own safety and did not reveal her identity as a writer until 2000. The penname that she chose is a combination of the first name that her mother had wanted to give her (Maïssa) and her grandmother's maiden name (Bey). The risks of writing in Algeria, Bey explains, are twofold, consisting of what she describes as a "Dangerous double transgression: *to dare to speak*, but also, and this is even more serious in our society, especially for a woman, *to dare to speak of oneself*, to unveil oneself" (Rice 48-49).

Women daring to speak of themselves freely is exactly where *Nouvelles d'Algérie* derives its power. While Bey shares the stories of women who have experienced immense hardship and suffering, she does so in such a way that is so raw and understated that it almost normalizes, but does not trivialize, their experiences. She is able to communicate unimaginable pain without exaggeration or a request for sympathy. In this way, she fights against the reactions that she believes the words "Arab woman," and thus writing about Arab women, automatically provoke: "I say Arab woman, and immediately you hear the deafening sounds of chains, immediately centuries of oppression are unfurled, immediately blinding walls go up and bodies are shut up behind closed doors, immediately piles of silence are beaten down, that bury piles of dreams that have already drowned under layers of interdicts" (Rice 53).

Bey's *Stories of Algeria* consists of ten short stories, each of which addresses an episode from the Algerian Civil War through a different narrator. The first story, "The Scream," examines life in war through the eyes of a young

girl watching the suffering of her parents. The second and third stories, “In the Silence of a Morning” and “A Day in June,” follow two individuals reflecting on the realities of the war in their daily lives. The fourth and fifth stories, “Sofiane B, Age 20,” and “Believe, Obey, Fight,” portray a different side of the war: one is narrated by a woman whose nephew has been killed as a suspected terrorist, while the other provides a window into the mind of an Islamic extremist who is about to execute a woman. The following story, “Unspeakable Body,” graphically and painfully recounts the thoughts of a rape survivor. “And If We Talked About Something Else?” discusses the normalization of violence through the perspective of a woman at her dinner table, and “The Matchmaker” presents a picture of the sacrifices that marriage requires, the difficulties of sexual desire, and the objectification of women. The ninth story, “When He is Gone She Dances” focuses on a woman doing her best to find freedom and happiness while being held captive by her abusive husband. The tenth and final story, “The Oracle,” paints a picture of a village plagued by the effects of war, and the dissatisfaction and powerful protestation of the women in that village.

One example of Bey’s fight to liberate individual voices is her examination of Algerian women’s space, specifically the apartment, as a representation of safety and protection, and at the same time, of suffocation and oppression. This theme is clearly seen in the celebrated Algerian novelist Assia Djebar’s *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* (1980), which had a significant influence on Bey’s writing and style. The Algerian writer Zehour Ounissi also addresses these elements of space in her short story (written in Arabic) titled “The

Descent” (1988). Bey explicitly includes representations of the Algerian woman’s apartment and its freedoms and constraints in two of her stories in *Stories of Algeria*: “In the Silence of a Morning” and “When He is Gone, She Dances.” In both, she presents oppressive spaces in which both women narrators reside, but she also focuses on the agency and power of both women. In the former story, Bey’s narrator chooses to remain in her apartment against her husband’s will; making this choice is the first time she able to say “no” to him. In the latter, the narrator is held captive by her husband, but every time he leaves, she undresses and dances, drawing strength from her solitude and her manipulation of this captive space.

Bey writes in poetic prose, often creating her own grammatical structures, omitting subjects or verbs, and inserting commas rather than beginning new sentences. Her voice within those of her narrators is ever-present, as several of her stories read like pained streams of consciousness that highlight and escalate her characters’ suffering. As the French writer Dominique Le Boucher aptly explains, “This audacity in the language calls upon an oral character inscribed in the writing, one that allows you to hear the words before understanding them” (102). In translating *Stories of Algeria*, it was this intimate, “oral character” that I sought to preserve.

My first challenge in translating was Bey’s title, *Nouvelles d’Algérie*. The French word “nouvelles” can mean either “stories” or “news.” The “d” also has a couple of possibilities, meaning either “from” or “of.” I weighed several options for the title, including *Stories from Algeria*, *News from Algeria*, *News of Algeria*,

and *Stories of Algeria*. I decided to use *Stories of Algeria* because I feel like it captures the feeling and narrative style of Bey's book the best of those four choices. Her chapters read more like stories than pieces of news because they are so personal, and due to the intimate nature of the narration and the stream of consciousness narrative, I felt that "of" better captured the sense of really being *in* the stories rather than looking in on them *from* the outside.

After reading the novel three times, and inspired by the American translator Lydia Davis's translation style and technique, I began translating *Stories of Algeria* in three distinct steps. The first step was my preliminary translation, the second an intensive word-by-word revision, with the original and my preliminary translation side-by-side, and the third a full read-through, without the French original, in order to revise anything in my English that seemed particularly awkward or unnatural in English. Above all, I wanted my English phrases to evoke the same feelings as Bey's French. Achieving this was challenging for two reasons: the first challenge was the inherent differences between the French and English languages; the second was the complexity of Bey's writing style.

According to the English Oxford Living Dictionary, the French language has a significantly smaller vocabulary than English ("Does English Have More Words"). Because of this, I found that French words much more commonly have two, three, or even four different meanings, and their connotations thus tend to be much more complex than equivalent words in English. Often I would encounter a word in Bey's original that, because of its multiple meanings, gave her phrase

both a literal and a metaphorical meaning that all English synonyms simply could not communicate. The most complex example of this is in Bey's story "Corps Indicible," or "Unspeakable Body":

Chercher la fissure. Rien qu'une lézarde au milieu. Chaque jour un peu plus creusée. Comme un tatouage. Trop compliqué. Mais elle est là. Lézarde c'est ça. Un peu plus creusée par mon regard sur elle. J'en fais ce que je veux. Yeux ravines à force de. Une à une j'enlève les écailles. Je descends. Je suis la lézarde. Je m'accroche aux parois asséchées. Au fond sur le lit de pierres je me couche. M'enfouis dans la rocaille. M'incruste (Bey 101).

The complexity of this paragraph is centered on the word "lézarde," which literally translates as "crack" or "crevice," but sounds and looks almost identical to the French word for "lizard." There is also the word "écailles," which literally means "scales," but in the context of a wall cracking could mean "chips" or "flakes." On a literal level, Bey's narrator is talking about a crack in a wall, crawling into it, and becoming it. But the words "lézarde" and "écailles," evoke the reptilian imagery of a lizard crawling into the crack in the wall, and even the narrator becoming the lizard. I ultimately translated this paragraph as follows:

Look for the fissure. Nothing but a crack in the middle.
Every day a little deeper. Like a tattoo. Too complicated.
But it's there. Crack, that's it. Made a little deeper by my
gaze on it. I do to it what I want. Eyes ravaged by the force.

One by one I remove the scales. I descend. I am the crack. I
cling to the dry walls. In the back on the bed of rocks I
sleep. Burrow in the rocky ground. Become embedded.

To remedy the lack of an English word that connotes both a *crack* and *lizard*, I tried to keep both the literal and metaphorical images by translating “lézarde” literally as “crack,” but “écailles” more figuratively as “scales.” In the end, the translation still felt incomplete, so I added an endnote to my translation to explain these choices.

In Bey’s “Un Jour de Juin,” or “A Day in June,” the French word “douceur” (and its adjectival and adverbial forms “doux” and “doucement”) is repeated a total of nine times in the first four pages. In most other examples of such repetition, I chose to translate with the same English word in order to replicate Bey’s style of deliberate repetition. However, in this case, I felt that the word “douceur” was communicating too many different ideas in French for the repetition of one English word to be sufficient. The English words I ultimately used were “warmth,” “warm,” “tenderness,” “slowly,” and “softly.” With this section of “A Day in June,” I chose to work mostly with context rather than Bey’s style. Each English synonym that I chose was the word that, in each particular case, was closest to the idea and feeling evoked by the French original. For example, I translated “c’est une journée de juin, chargée de soleil et de douceur” as “it’s a day in June, full of sun and warmth.” On the other hand, I translated “comme juste avant le plaisir, quand tu n’en peux plus justement de douceur” as “like right before pleasure, when you can’t take any more tenderness.” While I

wish I had been able to find a way to maintain Bey's repetition throughout this story, I ultimately felt in this case that keeping the same word throughout in English would lead to a loss of clarity.

The story "Croire, Obéir, Combattre" or "Believe, Obey, Fight" exemplifies Bey's complex style and stream of consciousness prose. Although this story is two pages long, it is also a single sentence tied together by commas. While I translated, I found that the commas came across as less natural in English compared to the French, but in staying true to Bey's style, I kept them all. "Croire, Obéir, Combattre" was the first story I translated in *Stories of Algeria*, and at that point I made the decision to keep all of Bey's original punctuation: I only used colons, semicolons, and dashes where she did; I maintained her run-on sentences with commas; and I never omitted or added a single period. This story contains almost every element of Bey's complex style. It reads like a stream of thought from the troubled mind of the narrator because of the combination of Bey's unconventional punctuation and her constant switching between first and third person. In this story, one can feel the narrator's distress, the frenzy of his thoughts, and the woman's silent power increasing with the emotional escalation of Bey's language.

At the beginning of the story, Bey writes: "Je suis un combattant de Dieu, mon Dieu, rien d'autre que ton nom en moi, je ne sais même pas son nom, elle remue les lèvres, comme si elle voulait me parler, il se penche un peu plus, elle est à genoux, il saisit ses cheveux" (95-96). Here is my English translation: "I am a soldier of God, my God, nothing but your name in me, I don't even know her

name, she moves her lips as if she wanted to speak to me, he leans in a little more, she is on her knees, he grabs her hair.” Bey’s addition of the narrator’s supplications to God adds a feeling of helplessness and anguish to this story. I sometimes found it difficult to distinguish Bey’s poetic moments from her straightforward ones. I needed to translate not only her words, but her manipulations of them. In other words, I had to translate her intentional errors and omissions.

In “Unspeakable Body,” Bey writes: “Je sais que les enfants. Les oiseaux aussi. Je elle chante avec eux. Petite fille avec des tresses Katia joue à la marelle sur le trottoir” (99). In English: “I only know children. Birds also. I she sings with them. Little girl with braids, Katia plays hopscotch on the sidewalk. Played. Cross of chalk.” This section of the story is an example of Bey’s switching between first and third person. However, what is unique about this example is how she keeps both subject pronouns in the same sentence: “Je elle” or “I she.” The choice that Bey makes here adds to the narrator’s feeling of being outside looking in on her own body, which is no longer her own because of the trauma she has suffered.

In addition to challenges I faced with Bey’s style, I also encountered several French words and phrases that were too difficult to express in English. For example, in “Unspeakable Body,” Bey writes, “Enfoncent en nous leur regard dur et dressé comme un pal. Partout. Épieux. Pieux. Le même mot” (107-108). I translated this section as “Thrust in us their hard gaze, straight like a stake. Everywhere. Spears. Pious. The same word.” The problem with my English translation is that “spears” and “pious” do not sound similar in the same way that

“épieux” and “pieux” do. Because of this, the meaning of the entire section is lost. In English, there is no longer the implication of the thin veil of piety behind which these evil men hide. Once again, the closest I was able to come in communicating this was through an endnote.

I also tried to translate Bey’s informal tone into English. Often, she omits the “ne” in the negative “ne... pas” construction, which implies an informality that is present in spoken French but seldom in writing. For example, in “Unspeakable Body,” she writes, “Il dit je veux plus la voir comme ça” (101). In leaving out the “ne,” Bey gives her writing a specifically oral character. In English, I wrote: “He says I don’t want to see her like that anymore.” Using the conjunction “don’t” instead of “do not” manages to communicate some of Bey’s informality, but there is still some aspect of her voice that is missing because of the difference between negative constructions in French and English.

Translating Maïssa Bey has been a great challenge and privilege. Ultimately my goal was to accurately reflect Bey and her language, and to provide a means of communication for her words to reach English speakers. However, to translate is also to accept the risks of translation, and to take on the responsibility of respectfully and intentionally representing the author’s original work. With that, here are Maïssa Bey’s *Stories of Algeria*.

Maïssa Bey

STORIES OF ALGERIA

Translated by Kayla Servin

For my mother

“I am searching for the crucial region
of the soul where absolute evil stands in
contrast to brotherhood.”

André Malraux.

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Preface

Here are stories of Algeria. Stories written in this time when the breath of death slashes raw the light of each morning. Texts written with the urgency to say, the necessity to let words speak, but which at the same time, I want to believe, are not only a litany of daily misfortunes broken down in life, because they were written in the desperate desire to believe that all is still understandable, without having the pretention to believe that I have completely understood.

To be able to write this book, I needed one day to look face to face at what, until then, I could not have imagined, no, not even imagined, without fear and without suffering. So I had to fight against the temptation of silence, to go meet my fear, to confront it and try to make it fold under the weight of words. A difficult experience, to be sure, to find the words to say the unsayable, to draw within me the most profound resources to give life to the characters that I see myself obligated to properly qualify as imaginary. Nevertheless, at the risk of repeating what, for many, is nothing more than an overused phrase, I should clarify that all resemblance with people having existed or existing is not fortuitous. And my characters seem more familiar and close today, almost more real than those I stand alongside every day. Maybe it is because I rediscovered myself in them. I attached myself to presenting men and women, above all women, caught in the snares of a History that will not remember their names. It should be said, these people are not heroes, they are what we are: beings in search of themselves who question their own fears, their cowardice, their sense of giving to their lives when everything around them is falling apart and there is no longer

anything but naked hate and blind violence. Who also try to construct or reconstruct a present on the irreversible absence, on the madness of things, on the joys refused or passed over by the scrutiny of a less and less bearable everyday life.

Fragments of a life carved away by the chisel of my anguish, raised voices at the threshold of madness, closed mouths where the restrained scream or sob trembles in the cavity of these pages, every moment of these lives can only record itself like a beat of the collective memory of a people that was supposed to be reduced to silence.

The Scream

“Wait for me, wait for me...” She runs, but she can’t seem to catch up to her brother. He does not hear her. Above them, flooded out from somewhere she doesn’t know, a scream tears apart the silence. A long scream, savage, interminable. She runs behind him, with all the strength of her little legs, but he is already far away. He’s bigger than she is after all, he is nine. And he’s a boy. He spends his time running with his friends in the street, while she plays with dolls out in front of the building, always within reach of the voice and the eye of her mother. She’s only six, and she didn’t understand right away, she still doesn’t understand anything, she follows him, that’s all, like always. She’d simply like this scream that is hurting her ears to stop. That her brother would also stop running, that he would wait for her. No matter how she calls for him, he doesn’t turn around, he hears nothing but the scream. She had not yet crossed the strangely deserted and silent courtyard when he disappeared up the stairs, as if snatched by this scream; he knew immediately where it was coming from. At the foot of the steps, she stops. Because her brother has disappeared, because her heart is beating too fast, because she cannot breathe anymore and because the scream now swells in an excessive trill. Suddenly, she can no longer move. She wants to advance, but her legs no longer obey her. Something stronger than her will pins her to the ground, and her feet, her entire body is held back by thousands of invisible threads. She finds, in that instant, a sensation that is both frightening and familiar, a little like in that dream she often has, where, followed by dark and contorted beings, monsters, she can’t escape. But, at night, when she wakes up

screaming in fear, her mother rushes immediately to her side – she knows how to calm her down, to reassure her, with kisses and tenderness. And now, she is alone. She finally succeeds in lifting one arm, then the other. She clings to the railing. The steps become distorted in her eyes, she does not know where to put her foot, she sinks, while the cry, stopped for an instant, starts again, modulating in strident variations, then in coherent but unintelligible sounds.

She will end up going up these steps. She does not know how. Very quickly maybe, or very slowly, one by one. She does not remember them. Blanks in her memory. But it is there, in front of her, the face of her mother. Unrecognizable, lacerated, soiled by tears of blood. Her body that rocks from right to left, like an unhinged robot. And her eyes. Her eyes that rest on her without seeing her, without recognizing her. The little girl retreats, turns away, pins herself against the wall, as her knees give out. The dream is too frightening, she must wake up, she needs to escape... maybe if she closes her eyes... Already, the night before, when those men came to take her father, she had succeeded in believing, despite the violent bangs on the door, despite the cries and desperate pleas of her mother who dragged herself at their feet, despite the sobbing and lamentations of her grandmother who had pulled her tightly against her to prevent her from seeing and hearing and getting up to try to hold onto her father, she had succeeded in believing that it was only a dream, and she had gone back to sleep, cradled until morning.

And then, the next day, they had sent her to play outside, under the watch of her big brother. She had well understood that it was not a day like the others:

already, the face of her mother, swollen with tears, and all these men who were coming and going, entering their home without knocking, the police, her brother had told her, but she had not believed him; they weren't wearing uniforms, they were nice to her and patted her head when they passed. She had not asked questions, sensing without doubt that an answer would come quickly. Perhaps she also did not want to hear the words that would have made her dream real, but that were already making their way to her consciousness.

She goes back down now, followed by the cry, into the dark corner below, under the stairs, there where she usually hides herself when she plays hide and seek with the other children. She sits on the cold floor, frozen, curled up, and puts her hands over her ears, pressing very hard. She closes her eyes and tries, tries desperately to forget everything, to abolish everything. Because, even though she is only six years old, she knows that death is like that, it was her father who had explained that to her one day. It is when someone sleeps at the bottom of a hole dug deep in the ground, and can't wake up anymore. Death, it's just a long sleep, and she also wants to die a little bit, like her father.

Maybe she crossed boundaries and borders like this, traveled all over vast, dark territories spiked by these inexplicable fears, up to the threshold of the void. She came back nonetheless.

She is going to stay there, in her hole to herself, for hours until nighttime. They're not looking for her. Her mother is not worried. And the little girl, numb from the cold and the pain, from fear as well, motionless in the shadowy nook, down under the stairs, cannot forget. She hears the incessant noise of steps above

her head. People are coming, a lot of people, to their house. And the screaming only stops in order to come back again. Other screams echo her mother's. Alone in her dark hiding place, the little girl about whom no one worries does not cry. She is in pain, so much pain, but she does not know where. It's in her head. In her body. It's something that flows out of her, a little bit of her childhood, perhaps. Something that leaves her. And that creates an empty space.

She will end up falling asleep. Children always fall asleep in the end. And she will find herself, the next day, she will not know how, in another house, sleeping in a bed that is not hers. No, she will not know how, but it's only a blank, another blank in her memory.

In the Silence of a Morning

She went out early this morning. It is just barely daybreak, and already a few lights are shining in the windows. It's the hour when the city, still gloomy and tepid from sleep seems to lazily wake from its dreams, before settling into the cruel light of the day. A few occasional pedestrians break the silence with their hurried footsteps. She stops in front of the little boutique, already open at this early hour. She waits for the cases of bread and milk, the newspapers to be unloaded from the van, then she helps herself without a word: a bag of milk, a loaf of bread, only one from now on, the three usual newspapers, she puts a few coins on the counter, waits for her change, and leaves very quickly, in a hurry to get back home.

She settles down in the kitchen in her usual spot. She does not turn on the light, she knows now that dawn disappears quickly, and seated facing the open window, she waits for the first ray of sunlight to glide over to her. Across the page of the newspaper that she automatically unfolded without even having the curiosity to read the titles. The day begins. Assia raises her eyes. Opposite her, between the edges of the two buildings that block her horizon, it is there, her little bit of sea. Only a line, a little bluer than the sky. A few centimeters, forgotten there, as if by accident. It is full of life, gloomy sometimes, it's something that pulsates, and it is always there that her eyes fall as soon as she opens the window in the morning. Even if it is still nighttime and she doesn't see the sea, she feels it, she recognizes its breathing, a familiar breath that now gives rhythm to the solitude of her nights. From the first day, as soon as they had moved into this

apartment, she had immediately felt its presence. “Come see,” she had almost screamed, “from here you can see the sea!” Réda had smiled, amused by her childish outburst.

The morning is still silent. The sunlight moves over her motionless arm, almost numb. Light whirls of heat in the air, like vibrations, barely perceptible. She does not move. Her arm is motionless, but it is living and warm, her whole body is living and warm.

All of a sudden, she begins to tremble...

The blood that flows out of a wound is also living and warm. Blood spurted out on her hands, on her arms, and onto her breasts, as soon as she leaned over him. In an absurd, ridiculous instinct, she put her hand on the hole to stop the blood, to hold back the life that was pouring out of it in huge gushes. A hole, just above the white collar of his shirt, where his skin is so soft under her lips. And the sky toppled over with Réda's hoarse scream, with his contorted eyes, with the drained gesture he made to extend his hands out toward her. As if to tell her to leave, to let him go.

She cannot stay motionless anymore. She gets up. She must move, shake this drowsiness that takes over her more and more often. She leaves the kitchen. Keep busy. But what could she do in this empty house where she feels useless? Organize? She does not have the strength, not yet. She opens the door to the

bedroom. The bed is too big; it takes up almost the whole room. Too big for her. She abandoned the bed, the bedroom, she sleeps on the couch in the living room, the TV on all night, images that she sees, but of which she does not grasp the meaning, that populate the hours when too much silence sharpens the fear and makes the suffering boil over.

On the desk, near the bed, the untouched disorder of papers. Bills and files. He left without having had the time to organize them, to sort, to file... he, so careful.

She does not want to touch them. What's the use? She already knows that she will not find anything there, nothing personal, nothing that she's looking for. Not even a scribble in the margin of a notebook. She'd had these instincts of a jealous wife before. Jealous of a past that escaped her in the stubborn silence of this man who would evade her questions. What she knew about him she had discovered through scraps and recoupments. Through people intervening. His brothers, his sister, would allude, occasionally in front of her, to memories of a childhood he did not want to talk about. A childhood that he considered to be banal. He would say, immediately annoyed by her insistence: "what do you want to know?" And she couldn't even say: tell me about yourself, tell me who you are, she did not dare, discouraged by his exasperated tone that he knew he took on, and she has nothing to cling to today, nothing but the story of their shared past.

All that remains is there on the desk, already covered in dust. There are also his clothes in the armoire, his smell. She must empty it, organize, she'll get her stepbrother to take everything, give it all away, maybe he'll want to keep a few of his suits, a few shirts...

The bag that he had packed is still there near the armoire. Some clothes for just a few days.

*

“Get your things ready! We're going!”

Her things? Which things? To go where? For how long? She turned around him, she didn't know... he bumped into her, losing his temper. Where to start? He had opened the armoire and was throwing a suit, some shirts, some underwear in a bag without bothering to fold them. She was hot in her jacket that she had not taken off. She was heading out when he had arrived, and she had opened the door, surprised; she was not expecting him so early. She watched him without even the slightest movement. Then she left the bedroom, walked a few steps in the hallway to go look for something... but what? She couldn't remember anymore and stayed standing, motionless.

“Assia, come here! Sit down and listen to me. Above all don't ask me any questions!”

She sat on the bed and gripped her hands very tightly together to keep them from trembling. She tried not to hear her heartbeat thumping hard in her chest.

“We need to leave, immediately, not a minute to lose! I came to get you, I shouldn’t have... Anyway, it’s my turn now, they had warned me but... it’s the second letter I’ve received, with the verdict this time... sentenced to death by the order of the Emir*!... They want to slaughter me... they just confirmed it. I’m the next one on the list. Don’t ask me why... I don’t even know myself. We’re heading to Malek’s, my brother, for two or three days... a week at most, afterwards we’ll see. He’s waiting for us. Don’t ask questions, there’s no time, I’ll explain later. Let’s go, get up, quickly! Get ready!”

She got up, mechanically she obeyed. So he knew. Maybe for a long time. He hadn’t said anything to her. And she hadn’t seen anything, or figured anything out... He had simply seemed a little more preoccupied over the last few days, a little quieter than usual. But she had attributed that to a passing fatigue, professional worries, a moment of depression. They were all depressed. Who wouldn’t be with the incessant attacks they had to endure, all this violence, the dead, the nearly daily massacres...

So, he had hidden from her that he had been threatened, and more still, sentenced to death. He had withdrawn a little more, he did not believe her to be

* *Émir*: spiritual leader in charge of sentences. Only the Emir has the right to give out fatwas.

capable of... She tried to understand, but she was having trouble organizing her thoughts. Why him? Just because he worked “for the government,” and that he was, in the logic of those who had sentenced him, at the service of power? She did not see another reason. He was a traitor in their eyes. That was the only reason and that could be enough to make him a traitor, a man to slaughter! And yet, he didn’t even have an important position at the ministry! He didn’t have a driver or a company car, but for the people in the city, he was “someone”, a well-placed person whom they occasionally used for projects. Hafid, one of his colleagues, had already paid with his life for continuing to work at the ministry, despite restrictions and threats. Réda knew that he too risked being detected, he was even waiting for it in a way, the two sometimes talked about it, just like that, without really believing it, but he had kept to himself his fear, his anxiety, he did not want to worry him... Yes, of course she would have been crazy with worry, she would have harassed him, she would have pressed him with questions, she would never have been able to stand staying a second more in this house, waiting for death, without even knowing where it would come from.

He was standing, near the desk. He had opened the drawers and was looking for papers. He had not even turned toward her to speak with her.

“And if I stay here? To organize everything, to prepare...”

She said it very quickly, without thinking. To leave everything, just like that, so quickly, no, she did not want to leave. She suddenly had a headache. A

throbbing pain in her temples. She was leaning against the wall, holding onto the door frame so as not to slip, like she wanted to, gently, closing her eyes, to just let her knees give way, let go, to get rid of this vice-grip that was preventing her from thinking, from finding the words to explain.

“Are you crazy? You want to stay here alone? You don’t know them! They’re capable of anything! Don’t you understand that we’re being watched right now? Day and night!”

He went to the window, moved the curtain aside in an angry motion.

“Come see! Look at all those young people standing in each corner! There are those from the city and others who blend in with them quietly, discretely, without drawing attention. You see them every day, right? You know what they do there all day? Nothing! They have nothing to do! Until someone comes to propose that they stay there, precisely, to do nothing, nothing but watch someone, they will not even tell them why, watch their goings and comings, a little service, in exchange for a few dinars, just enough to buy their cigarettes and pills* ... I don’t know them. They don’t know me either... they don’t even know my name, I’m sure of it... but they would be ready to do anything if one paid them.

She did not know this violence of his, this voice. Even when he would lose his temper with her, which happened pretty rarely, she did not give him the

* *Cachets*: pills of tranquilizers or neuroleptics used by young people which can have the same effects as a drug.

opportunity, he would keep control of his voice and his gestures. He appeared even more calm in those moments, frozen in bottled-up anger, more difficult to contend with than a violent thunderstorm, and quite often, he had only to raise his tone, just barely, for her to lower her head to avoid him... Incidentally, they were not arguing, they were keeping quiet. Their relationship had never known these flashes that make anger subside and dissipate clouds. She feared the hostile silences that could last for weeks, and she was always the first to concede...

Standing against the door, she looked at him. She had the strange sensation of staggering, as if the floor was giving way beneath her feet and all her certainty was flying away in flashes, disintegrating. He, so strong, so sure of himself, a rock that nothing could have shaken until this day! This is what she believed, what she had always believed... So, he was afraid. It was fear that made his voice violent and marked his face that he turned away, so that she could not see the ravages of this new feeling for him, for her, and that he could not control, there, in front of her.

She watched him come and go briskly in the bedroom, take papers and books on the desk and shove them feverishly into his briefcase.

She had nothing left but to obey. Like always.

She headed towards the armoire with its wide open doors, and took a dress off a hanger. And then a skirt. Just like that... at random... some things... For

how long? She turned back toward him to ask him the question. He was seated on the bed, his head in his hands. He was thinking. He turned his back to her.

“Actually, I’m going to stay.”

Her heart was beating, a little anyway. A little softer nonetheless. But she no longer had a headache. And contrary to all expectations, he was silent. She saw only the nape of his neck, his black hair streaked with strands of white and silver, and his shoulders, maybe a little shrunken.

“I will join you later, tonight or tomorrow, I’ll see...”

She did not even know if he was listening to her, if he had heard her. She continued, “It’s better that you go immediately, as quickly as possible... before they...” The word stayed stuck in her throat. Kill, slaughter, take down, eliminate... how many words that say the same thing, words used so that they are read and heard, like in the overly violent action films that she refuses to see. But this was not a film. She had in front of her a man, her husband, sentenced to death by a phantom court, to which he had not even been summoned, and she was speaking to him like she never had before, as if something else of much greater importance to her was at play at that exact moment.

“As you wish. When you decide, you just have to call Malek. He will come to get you.”

His voice now was empty of all expression. Of all feeling she had fleetingly thought of. As if he were already far away, elsewhere, in a world where nothing could affect or surprise him. He got up while he spoke. He picked up his briefcase on the desk, and his bag, and he passed in front of her to leave the bedroom. He seemed worn out, like he was coming out of battle. Had she achieved a victory? She wasn't even sure. What did she want exactly? She had succeeded in staying. Why was she so insistent? If only she knew...

You can't mistake the sound of a door closing, even if the door is made of iron, even if it is slammed violently, like a detonation. That is what she thought right away, very quickly, before the second detonation. And then there was that dreadful emptiness, those few seconds when you try to hold on with all your might to that moment frozen in time, when you believe, when she believed with all her being... no, it's not possible, not that, no, he's going to come back upstairs, he's going to come back, to reassure me, to tell me it's nothing, this lapse of time, so short, the blink of an eye... those few moments suspended in front of you, which you cling to against all odds, already with something deep down in you that comes undone so quickly, and already your heart knows and reasoning falters.

They were there. They were waiting for him.

*

She talks to him now. She knows that he is no longer there to listen and come get her, and that is why she can talk to him. She tells him all the words she had prepared to try to justify her decision, her refusal to follow him, the words that she did not have the time or the strength to tell him before he left. And she surprises herself sometimes in repeating them out loud, as if he were able to hear her. You know, I only wanted to stay in our house, we could not both leave, abandon everything just like that, overnight... It was most urgent for you to be safe. That was the only thing that counted for me. And what's more, you would have had more freedom alone. I didn't see both of us moving in with Malek, for months, in his little apartment... With his wife, his kids... can you imagine? No, that wasn't the answer.

She wanted to stay home. In her house, the only place where she felt safe. She really thought that. Stay in this protected space. She did not risk anything. Like everyone, he had put iron bars on all the windows, a double front door with a door of iron, hideous but sturdy. Her house was neat, clean, welcoming, everything in its place, like all houses without children. She would not have been able to stand imposing, feeling like a burden, even at her step-brother's,⁹ she had her ways, she so liked the calm of the rooms of their apartment.

She is alone now. And in the silent house, the words that she can no longer say to anyone, the words that she repeats to herself every night, every morning, uselessly, can no longer crush the horrible truth buried deeply within her with

their weight, so deeply that she now believed she would never again be able to make them resurface.

He had come back to get her. He had risked his life for her. And she had refused to follow him. To leave the house with him. For the first time, yes, for the first time, she had refused to obey him. Without telling him why. She couldn't tell him such a thing, she tried herself to silence that voice within her, that horrible thought. But she could not forget his first reaction, no, instinctual would be more accurate, uncontrollable, dictated by the fear that erases years of submission and silence, this fear that erases all the other fears and renders them silly and vain. She had feared for her life, her own life, that had seemed to her at that moment the only precious thing that she had ever possessed. A panicked fear that annihilated every other feeling in her. She did not want to leave the house with him. She did not want to wait for him while he would close the door, go down the steps side by side, get in the car with him. She knew, having read the newspapers, that *they* would always wait for their victims in the stairwells or in the vicinity of their houses. And ceaselessly she relived this scene, these moments. They were there, both of them, separated by that vile thing that was fear, a fear that had given her the courage to say no, and to him, for the first time since they were married, the weakness of accepting a decision that he had not made. And while they were talking, while he was getting his things together, she could not think of anything else. *They* were perhaps already there, hidden, so close, maybe he had even passed in front of them without noticing anything, and *they* were waiting for them

to leave, the two of them, to carry out their task. *They* would not have spared her... No, she did not want to leave with him, she did not want to be a potential target by his side, she did not want to die with him. And that, even now that he is no longer there, she cannot tell him.

Evasion? Cowardice? Betrayal? She can't find terms strong enough, harsh enough, to accuse herself with. But she has her whole life in front of her, all her sleepless nights, to find... to try to justify, in her own eyes... Will she ever be able to? So, she thinks of that woman who had fled her house to escape death, *forgetting* her six-month old baby in his crib, the day of the earthquake of El-Asnam. She also sees again the scenes of panic, men and women, even children, knocked over, trampled, crushed... hundreds of people who, because they were afraid and did not want to die, could forget centuries of civilization in a fraction of a second... and today she understands.

If he had not insisted, if he had not required her to follow him, but maybe he had understood... she will never know...

Réda is dead because of her. Because he had come to get her. She tells herself, she desperately tells all who come to see her— without explaining why he had left alone—that he could have, that he should have settled for phoning to warn her, sending for her, or asking her to join him at his brother's. She would have brought clothes, things he needed, she would have stayed with him, of course, at his brother's or elsewhere, she would have followed him anywhere,

without considering even for an instant separating from him, leaving him all alone to confront his fear and the precarious life that he would have had to lead from that point on. And then she continues, she can't stop herself... she lets her regrets well back up, and her resentments too, those that resurface even though she cries inconsolably... He had always thought her incapable of confronting the smallest of problems. It was his job to take charge, to decide, to command. He supervised everything, down to the smallest details of their life, to the way in which she needed to dress when they went out together. And she accepted, she had always accepted everything, her mother trembled at her father's smallest frown. She had even accepted without protest, without discussion, to stop working, to abandon her job as a teacher since he had asked her to, shortly after their marriage, because he couldn't stand her hours, the time that she should spend on her class preparations and her corrections, and yet she loved her job, she loved the children. And he had molded her so well to spend her time spying, she too, just like her mother did, the smallest changes in his facial expressions, from waking up until his return from the office, at each moment of the day, to measure his mood, adapt hers to his, as one checks a barometer to know what the temperature will be.

How it pains her whenever the image appears of his body lying lifeless like the ground, wrapped in a white sheet! She had uncovered his face, one last time, and in a whisper, she had asked his forgiveness. He rests there, home, in the town where he was born. She was not left alone for even a minute during that long, too long funeral, cradled, accompanied by the brouhaha of the many voices

around her... all those women sitting around her, who came to watch for the traces of grief on her closed face... One time, only once, she stood up and listened carefully. Two old women near her were discussing the tragic death of Réda's father, assassinated by a commando of the OAS¹ while he was leaving his home. She had wanted in that moment to scream out in rebellion. What? Couldn't God save the fate of this fatherless child, born in grief and pain, marked by death before even opening his eyes to life? But she said nothing. She would never again be able to say anything to this elusive little boy who became a man, a companion whose silences she never knew how to decode.

She is still standing in front of the bedroom door. She doesn't know how long she stayed there, motionless, lost in the troubled waters of her memories. Time... but what of it? She has no points of reference anymore. She has nothing left to do. Her time is hers, hers alone. She will eat soon, if she is hungry. She goes toward the window, she opens it and leans over to feel the heat of the sun on her bare arms, on her face. Lifting her head, she sees the young neighbors, leaning against the wall of the apartment building in their usual spot, just opposite her place. Farther away, children quarrel over a ball. It's vacation, they have nothing else to do. The start of the school year is approaching. She must think about writing up her application for a teaching position.

A Day in June

The sun is so brilliant! It's enough to make you disgusted with the night. And the sky, its blue colors, they're doing just fine today. The clouds are only there to distract your gaze, so you don't become bored. So, you'll start like this: it's a day in June, full of sun and warmth. Not too bad, the warm weather! As if you could feel it, touch it, take it in your hands. Just like that, you say warmth, and the idea of warmth comes over you. A little as if something in you were slowly melting, you know, like right before pleasure, when you can't take any more tenderness. You can keep going farther, there's also the sea. You don't see it from there where you are, but as it's not very far away, you sense it, you imagine. Blue, so as not to change. But we're going to take it at the moment when it charges. No, not when the waves hit you... the color! All in grays, but grays in the plural, to be specific, even if it doesn't change anything, it doesn't mean anything if you don't understand. You can add a few white crests, to show movement, exactly like with the sky. Do you see the painting now?

So, tell me, a day like this one, what would you want to do? Go outside of course, leave your office, house, school, or from wherever you are closed in... Hurtle down the stairs, run across the streets to arrive at... And there you stop. In the middle of all this momentum! To go where? You can't go very far. And whatever you do, slow down... there, slowly, that's it. Dazzled by the sun, the warmth and all the rest, you have certainly forgotten that here, in Algiers, you can't run across the streets. Not anymore. Do you want me to explain? No sudden

gestures, you have to know how to control your movements these days. Got it? I didn't do it on purpose... For more details, read the papers, death notices, the last pages, just before the TV guide. "...Mowed down in the prime of life, by murderous bullets..." It's not even specified where they could have come from, not necessary, everyone understands. You wouldn't have gone ten steps, ten strides if you prefer, before you'd have been mowed down by a bullet. Not necessary to add murderous, I think, do you think bullets could have other intentions? So, stopped in the middle of your momentum or your being mowed down, I like that word, there are the colors of fields and wheat in it, mowed down by a bullet whose whistling you didn't even hear. You see, that's not bad either. Wait, let's redo the scene: carried away by an inexplicable elation, he ran in the dazzling sun on a beautiful day in June. Close-up shot of his legs and long, powerful strides. And then zoom out on the stopped people. Immobile. Slow movement of heads following his running. Very important. Think of the silence and the shocked expressions on the faces of the girls who passed by. A bullet comes from who knows where, and strikes him suddenly. Close-up on the fallen man, the stunned eyes that keel over, and the body that collapses in slow motion. Avoid red. We'll go back to the calm blue of the sky and the faraway sea.

Good, let's keep going. It's still a day in June, filled with sun. The warmth, we'll forget. We'll also forget the sea, if you want. The real one, with the golden sand, not the one that crashes on the rocks behind the blocks of the city. Too far away. And what's more, it gives us ideas, desires... Dangerous, all that!

The sun, at least, we can go with that. We are so used to it that we don't even see it anymore. It's there, every day, like the dot above the *i* of our lives. That's too easy, you'll tell me! It doesn't matter, we're keeping it! Hey, that reminds me of the other one, Meursault, sea and sun like the French professor was saying, the story of someone who kills an Arab, one day, on a beach. I don't know why I haven't forgotten this story yet... high school, it's already long ago! But that... it might even be the only thing that I remember. Who knows why! So, I'll keep going: Meursault when he shot the Arab, with a capital A, as if it were his name, he said that it was the sun. The sun that gives him rage, and hate too, the desire to kill. Maybe that's still the explanation today. I would have more likely believed the opposite: night, the full moon... If I had to kill someone one day... These outbursts happen to you sometimes! I must not be the only one, by the way. Only the guys here, they don't chalk it up to the sun! Okay, and if we talked about something else? Not very cheerful, all that, erase it! What would go best with such a day? No need to think very long. Girls, of course! You see, just say that word, your eyes light up right away and you already feel, there, deep inside you, something that quivers softly...

In the month of June, the girls... Hold on, we'll redo the beginning: this day in June, why this one, you can't explain that either, you feel in your body, in your head, like a tickle, something that wants to escape. It takes hold of you right away, upon waking, and you can't figure out what it is. You get out of bed, even more dazed than usual, you can't stand it anymore: the faucet that doesn't run

when you want to wash your face, even though it's like that every day, the half-awake little brother who comes and hangs on your legs, for a little you would have crushed that one, like a bedbug, the eyes of your old woman, even harder to face than her words. Even while leaving, shutting the door, you feel those eyes behind you... a screwdriver. So you go down. Passing on the stairs, the odors... You are outside now. And there, as soon as you're there, before you even ask yourself which direction to take, you receive everything, all at once: the light, the swaying of a girl who passes just in front of you, her perfume... Immediately you forget everything else. The day that is starting will be beautiful, that's for sure, a real gift from the Good Lord, above all don't forget to thank him very quickly on your way. You're already floating in the wake of this girl whom He had surely wanted to put on your path today. You did not have time to see her face, so you start to dream... She'll turn around, send you a smile... You imagine the prominence of her lips, the color of her eyes, eyes like you've never seen before. Or actually yes, in the dreams that keep you up at night in your bed. Yes, but those girls, that only smile in your dreams, hold on, you're getting ahead of yourself... For the moment, all that you can see is black hair, curls that run down to the middle of her back, that's better than nothing, it's already a lot, there are so many veils, scarves, for so long now that you almost forget what women's hair looks like. Look, if you really think about it, you can understand why. It's more prudent for them. For us also. It's crazy what an effect a cascade of free flowing curls can do, with the light that clings to it, in sparkles. Just thinking about it sends a shiver down my back. It's true, the rarer it is, the more precious, I'm not

the one who said it... You continue to walk behind her, your gaze descends, a little lower, and you make out her hips under the light blouse that covers them. Firm, golden, like the little bit of leg that peeks out from her skirt, long, but not too long. And even if you have never set foot in the Sahara, it leaves you wanting the dunes, round, golden, and warm. In your head, the contours and colors spring to mind, making you truly regret never having gone farther than Blida... You scale those dunes, you get lost in them, you sink into them... and while you are there, lost in your dreams of the dunes and the warmth, the girl, don't tell me that she didn't notice anything, continues to move forward in the middle of the crowd, superbly indifferent. You're not going to continue to follow her like that, indefinitely. You could maybe talk to her, try, you have nothing to lose, after all, why not try your luck, it's so beautiful outside... Go ahead, try, what will you say to her? You could start like this for example, politely, with sayings like "Mademoiselle, I...", no, that doesn't work, you're not very gifted at this, maybe if you weren't alone... You give up, lamentably, and you say nothing, because deep down you know that it's already lost. You might as well be on a cloud, with "Handsome Guy" as your name, you can tell that she's not the type to let herself be approached on the street by the first person who comes along. And even if she did turn around, and she answered you, what could possibly happen next? In your pockets, you don't even have anything to pay for a coffee, and girls, everybody knows, they notice that right away, before you open your mouth to... So, have you decided? Will you try anyway or will you give up to rejoin the friends that you didn't even greet in passing? You already hear their snickers... And all of a

sudden, you are furious. Furious about letting yourself be tricked by... by what exactly? By the light? And by the sun? All of that is bullshit! You'll see! Furious, you pick up the pace, you get closer, you almost brush past her, and there, you jostle her, but not too violently, you approach with a big smile, you never know, but she doesn't look at you, you could just as well not exist, she continues to break through the crowd, her eyes lowered, you didn't even see her eyes, and you let her leave, saying to yourself that she wasn't that beautiful anyway, and that... You retrace your steps, slowly, with, at the back of your throat, a vague regret, the bitter feeling of having let something escape... I know, I know, you don't trap birds with a dreamcatcher, even on a morning in June. And what's more, the day is still young.

The day is still young. Nothing to do but hang around with friends. Not yet time to share the first joint. We lean against the wall. The same wall for ages. Each person in his own territory. It will soon take the shape of our backs. Maybe that would be more comfortable. But at least we have an unobstructed view, we have front row seats: there is the intersection, the cars, the fixed police roadblock a little higher up, the stores, the pedestrians on the sidewalks, nothing escapes us. Of course, we know them by heart, it's always the same ones who pass, we always end up identifying them, they do it too, there are even some who greet us! But we have much to occupy our eyes, if not our minds. Just to watch the time pass. Look, the time... You trap the word in flight, you crumple it up, and you make it a spitball that you throw at the heads of the pedestrians, to see their

reactions. Because that's what you read in their gazes that graze you without lingering. They don't have the time to stop and see it pass. Not like us. Look at him for example, the little old man there, with his black plastic bag with a good dozen baguettes sticking out. He got up early, he did his shopping, and now he's returning home. The same shopping, the same path, every day, for years, without a single detour. He doesn't have time to lose, he lost it a long time ago. You see him? Look closely, time is written on his face in large scars. And what weighs down his steps are all the hours, all the days, all the years of his life, piled one on top of the other. Do you think he has succeeded in stealing one instant, only one, for himself, for nothing but himself? Look, he must certainly be less tormented than you, with that bird with clipped wings that won't stop trembling in your head. And that other guy there, in his car, one hand on the wheel, windows down, music, black glasses... it's so nice out, a beautiful day for a car ride. When you have a car like that, time must glide all on its own, no need to push it. It comes to you, you invent it, you do with it what you want...

And there you have it, it comes back... it rises like a need to vomit. Once again, you feel trapped in your head, in your body, on this street. You tell yourself, a day like this, I'm not going to let it rot on the vine! I need to move, it's like I have pins and needles everywhere. So, you stand there, your friends reasonably surprised, they do not understand, they cannot understand and anyway you didn't tell them anything, you yourself don't understand, there are thirty days in the month of June, and normally they are all the same. But right now, it's as if

something were suddenly falling on top of you. A cloud, a dark mass, stifling, that crushes you, a bit as if the night were too early for the hour, rushing in through a door that was accidentally left open. Gone are the blues that turn heads! But the sun is still suspended above you. You feel it weigh down on your shoulders with all its weight while you walk. In your head is the dimmer, completely broken, without a doubt. You walk, without knowing where you're going. No particular desire, just a bad taste in your mouth. The point is to put as much distance as possible between you and the others, all the others, friends and the rest. And as you can't just erase them, the best way is still to dive into the crowd, let yourself be absorbed by the movement, by the noise. Fists clenched in your empty pockets, you bury yourself in the crowd that overflows the sidewalks. You let yourself be carried by the rolling wave, and you are nothing but a drop of water in this sea, a drop of water, nothing more, like everyone else, nothing more, what did you think? And what lets you distinguish one drop of water from another drop of water? Can you tell me that? One day you will also end up absorbed by the dust, without even realizing it. For now, you have only twenty years behind you, you still chase after your dreams, with enthusiasm and failures, and you struggle uselessly. You also sometimes soar, and inevitably you find yourself in a zone of turbulence and you feel sick to your stomach... The problem is that you don't see the pockets of air coming, so you can't even avoid them! They melt on you, most often when you expect them the least. You see, for example, just five minutes ago, it was still so nice out!

What you need now is calm and silence... At first glance, nothing is more simple: you just have to go back home, close yourself in your room. There, you wouldn't even hear the sound of your steps, softened by the rug, or the carpet, if you prefer. Shall we continue? You close the shades, and in the soft light of a lamp, you allow yourself a pause, in a silence barely drowned in music... It's nice, eh? You would think you were in a book or a movie, you know, when the tired hero returns home, welcomed by... etc. etc. Really, you're a lost cause! You're taking off for no reason! In your house, there are neither rugs nor shades! No one has a room, and you even less than the others if it were possible. Everyone takes the space he finds, and sometimes you have to get there first or fight for it! No place to entertain one's desires, the vital minimum, well, that depends for whom... For the music, it's easier, it comes from all over, no need to turn the knob. You can get all the TV channels at once, since we're connected to the satellite dish in the neighborhood. Now that's progress! The radio stations too, especially in the morning, very early. Useless to open the windows, everything comes through the walls and the ceilings, with varied accompaniments, take your pick: screams, insults, laughs, complaints, there's something for everyone, you just have to ask! Silence? In the luxury department! Alright, you're not home often, but after a certain time, at night, when there is no one left in the streets, you can't do anything else. You go home to sleep, and even there, silence is so scarce that you search for it in your sleep. But that's not exactly silence, it's nothingness, absence.

And then, most importantly, at home, there's your mother. Her words and her silences... There is what you can read in her eyes, each time you pass through the door. There are the words she throws, oh, without directly addressing them to you, her tactic, but that crash onto you, more accurately than if she had aimed at you. And you can't even send them back, it's your mother after all. She waits for you to be within range of her voice and she begins. It all unravels. They're all there, in single file. First the sons of the neighbors across the street: the policeman, she starts with him, normal, the trafficker* and his shopping bag, the unemployment engineer, but at least he's in school. Then she starts up again, the guy on the fourth floor, three times he was sent to prison but he's managing just fine... and then all the others, about whom we don't know much, who disappeared several months ago but send money to their families who don't know how to respond to the questions that the police ask them. She could have continued for hours, so you pretend not to hear, not to understand, you keep pretending. You almost miss the time of slaps, kicks, and tantrums. They were more direct, and more brief, less violent, a few screams for good measure, a few tears, and all was settled until the next time. She doesn't dare anymore now, you're no longer that age. There are quite a few other things that you regret also, but... let's not labor the point. Returning to the past does nothing but open up old wounds, which could hurt, since you've tried for so long to erase the memories!

* *Trabendiste*, from the Spanish word *trabendo*: trafficker. A word used to describe young people who travel to import and sell all kinds of illegal merchandise.

When you return home, you pull the mattress out from under the sofa, you drag it to your reserved place, in a corner of the room, the communal room that is used as a room for everything, far from the others, especially the youngest ones, you never know, you could contaminate them, but they will come here also, maybe even quicker than you, you can only watch them, that's for sure, there's no other path for them. While they are all glued to the TV, you lay down, you cover yourself, you wrap yourself up in your covers, hermetically for isolation, and you try to fall asleep. Fall asleep? That could take hours, not just because of the noise. It's at these moments when your brain starts to work at full speed, as if you had plugged yourself into a camera. And as soon as you close your eyes, it takes off in all your senses, the flashes that crackle on the dark background, a real firework show! There are images, scenes that you would have thought were recorded, with sound as an extra, pieces of sentences picked up here and there, and that you repeat to yourself, mechanically, without trying to understand why some are there more than others, since you hear so many, it's not easy to understand them all! There are also memories that weave themselves in sometimes, insidiously, and that you chase away ruthlessly. What you are trying to retain are the images, the ones that help you leave, transport yourself elsewhere, not even that far away, not London, not Paris, not New York, no, you haven't yet gone so far as interplanetary voyages! Those images there, you discover them deep down inside you, you assemble them and you make unknown landscapes, lands that only you can explore, dazzling with colors, you yourself become a part of them, an element of these landscapes, a tree or an entire forest, a rock, a grain of sand, a color...

and you run away, you drift off, you melt, nothing can catch you anymore, everything else disappears... And when you come back, because you always end up coming back, as no one has ever spoken to you about this, you tell yourself that maybe they are somewhat right, your friends, to look at you sometimes with worry... For them, these beautiful images are pieces of paper attached to pages of calendars, sheets of paper that you hang on the walls of living rooms, to forget everything nearby. They prefer framing setting suns or peaceful cows in a green meadow. But that's why friends are so useful; when one of us begins climbing the walls, the others remain on the ground, for the landing.

For the moment, it's not a matter of returning home or climbing the walls. Night is still far away, and at your house, it's rush hour. Between your sisters returning from the office for their afternoon break, they work, and the little ones, starving and noisy, there's no place for a useless mouth. Well, she doesn't say it like that, your mother, but she thinks it so loudly that you hear it. You must wait, maybe a long time, for the day when you will deposit in her hands of which you forgot the touch, a salary, no matter how you'll have earned it, so that they make room for you. Unless you leave before, like your father, which is more likely.

Anyway, it is already in your past, this morning in June. Just a few hours and you will come to the end of the entire day. Patience... For a long time, how you've come to notice it, that you're turning circles, without even being able to tear yourself from your center of gravity. They are always there, within walking

distance, the buildings of the city. They stretch out their shadow behind you, little by little, and at this speed, they will end up catching you again.

On the street corner, you run into friends who are coming back from the mosque. That's the point of reference. Practical for knowing the time, within a few minutes. No need for a watch. Even for meetings. It's always before or after some prayer or another. Especially since there is only that to wait for. At the call to prayer, we all pick ourselves up as one single man, we go to the mosque and we make our presence known. There is prayer, the same movements, the same words recited, a few minutes of great fraternity, and, upon returning to our observation posts, we wait for the next one. Four times a day, five really, but the first prayer, the one at sunrise, that is every man for himself. Rare are those who have the courage to tear themselves from sleep at such an early hour, there are some of them nonetheless, make no mistake, but to be honest, most of us don't even hear the call. Do you really believe that God, in all his clemency, as one says, knows how to forgive, God would be angry at us at the hour of our judgement? Whatever it is, for us, the day is nothing but a sum of spaces between two prayers, the night also, actually. It's mathematical. Nothing else to wait for. You don't have to wait for the hour to return home, you are free, no one is waiting for you, you could just as well not go home, that already happened to you and no one even noticed since there are so many of us there, and since she started to not be able to stay standing after a certain time, your mother no longer has the instinct to count her children before going to sleep. She prefers not to lock the front door,

there's no risk, what could one possibly take from us... You don't even have to wait for the time you can leave, like employees at the office, one eye on the newspaper that they have time to memorize, the other on their watch, or like in high school, when you were outside before the clock had even finished chiming, the teacher also, actually... And then, no bus to watch for and take by storm to get somewhere, in this moment particularly, it's not that you are afraid, but since the day when two of your friends were picked off by a bomb in El-Biar in a café where they had never set foot before, you avoid it, the same thing could just as well happen to you, and they would have a hard time identifying you too.

So, you don't know any more what an expectation is like. You have forgotten. You live with your feet stuck in the present, just the minute that is coming and that quickly collapses to join the others. What turned your head backwards today, you only understand it now, it took you some time, normally you're quicker, it was nothing but the trace of a poorly erased dream... certainly. You know, one of those elusive, hazy imprints, that stays in a dream and spills over to the day, that you sometimes find in the course of a gesture, a word, without really knowing from where it could have come. It's so simple, just like that! There, you have the explanation! You rediscover the feeling that you had in opening your eyes on your life this morning. As if you were waiting for something today, precisely. A little bit like when you were little, and having woken up very early on the morning of the first day of school, well before everyone else, you waited in your bed, trembling with impatience and curiosity,

you waited for the time to go to school with your new backpack, your notebooks, your smock with your name on it, when you still believed, poor innocent child, that the world was going to open for you and that to fly you simply needed to spread your wings... You see, it was like there was a time difference, and it was this that unhinged the alarm clock that you have not adjusted for several years already. That's all.

Phew! It's better now that you no longer have to decipher the signs. June, the sun, the girls and all the drama, all the balloons are deflated. Flattened... It was enough to look. Let's go, let's go, move along, there's nothing out of the ordinary, this is nothing but a day like any other. Lift your head and look: the sun continues on its way, unimpeded, and the day, already well underway, will finish by consuming itself, like always.

How light you feel! Who would have believed that a poorly erased dream could weigh down so heavily! Standing in the middle of the street, you almost want to tell the others, those who pass by... to tell them... but no, do you think that they would stop to listen to you? Listen to a guy like you? If you want them to stop, you'll have to find something else besides words, they are saturated with them. Hold on, I have an idea! We could always try a few movements of the hips, there you go, that's it, arms up, as if you were dancing. A few seconds at most and that's enough for everyone to look at you. You have to see their faces! You're starting to amuse them, seriously. So you continue, for pleasure, it's been so long

since anyone looked at you like that! People stop, they move aside. You find yourself in the middle of an empty space, as if there were an invisible barrier around you. You dance, you clap your hands too, to the rhythm of music that only you can hear. There are some who smile, they don't seem surprised, they must understand, they know this language, it wouldn't take much for them to join you, they have the same music in their heads as you, that's for sure... And then there are the others, those who slowly shake their heads before turning away, full of pity that assures them of their own "normalcy." They will have something to talk about when they go home tonight, something other than the rumors and grim news with which they nourish themselves at every meal... The poor guy, they will say, stressing particularly the adjective, he ended up cracking, one more... harmless, that one... He was dancing in the middle of the street like he had music in his head, what a tragedy, so young! We see all sorts of things these days...

It's true, one would say that you're cracking, that bits are falling off of you, in little pieces, suspended between the sky and the earth for an instant, before heavily crashing to the ground, one after another. Entire moments of your life, all those unfulfilled and stubborn desires that continue to roam around you, despite your vigilance... and it's like a ballet of dust, a sort of haze that isolates you a little more than the others. Hey! Careful! You have to save them a little bit. You need them to live, it seems! Especially now that you know. But you know what, now that I think of it? Do you know that there's nothing here for you, nothing to wait for, neither this day, nor all the others that will follow? Is this a revelation to

you, this obvious fact of your life? Strange that this has such an effect on you, worse than if you had shot yourself! Maybe it's time to come back to reality.

Right? There is no one around you anymore! They are all gone. Surprising! Even so it was not you who... Your friends over there are making gestures at you, they seem distraught, you could say that they're screaming, that they want to tell you something, but they are too far away, you do not hear and you ask yourself...

What you hear clearly, on the other hand, is the sound of a race behind you. You have just enough time to turn around before being violently jostled by two guys, hurled against the wall. While you try to pick yourself up, the street empties, almost instantaneously, there are people running in all directions, and there is... this stopped car, the doors open, right in the middle of the street, no one at the wheel, no one... that's it, you realize, maybe a few seconds too late, at the same time as the space around you fills with screams, whistles, gunfire... it had to happen one day, it's the order of things, a day in June, so that was it... run, but run... quickly... like the guy who continues to run there, in front of you, with this red star that gets bigger on his back... so that was it... quickly, above all don't stop... the corner of the street, there, so close... a few more meters... you're almost flying, you see... and all at once, the sky turns suddenly, tears itself to pieces and comes down on you in a great red crash... But maybe it's me who... who knows...

Sofiane B, Age 20

Sofiane is dead. I learned the news while reading the article in the newspaper that told the story of his last adventure. Maybe it was also his first, I don't know, I haven't known anything about him for a long time, not since this dirty war started. No one in the family had warned us.

He was twenty years old, my son's age.

Sofiane, he was the little blond boy with a timid smile, and lively and curious eyes who would cling to my skirt when we went to visit his parents. He would follow us everywhere, silent and attentive to our every word, until his father, discovering his presence no matter how quiet he was, sent him away with a harsh order. He obeyed without a word, left the room, and did not venture out past the doorway until our departure. We would find him downstairs, standing near the car, and he would obediently let himself be embraced, and would not take his eyes off us until we had disappeared around the first bend, all the way to the end of the main street of the village.

Sofiane is dead. Perhaps I forgot to tell you that he was, according to the police report, taken word for word from several newspapers, "a dangerous terrorist."

He was also my nephew, the son of my brother.

How old was he the last time I saw him? Fifteen, maybe sixteen. My memory draws in very clearly defined contours the image of a well-built adolescent, still smooth-faced, with an odd voice oscillating between low notes and high, and still the same timid smile contrasted strangely with the exuberance and assurance of his older brother. He carried his little sister in his arms, the last-born, and I'd noticed the patience and tenderness with which he fed her, while their mother was busy serving us. Near him, also silent, and as brunette as he was blond, stood his other sister, Amina, his twin.

I could add other details, say that I sensed in him something different, already, certain tiny, imperceptible signs to which you don't attach any importance and that you can't decipher until afterwards... too late... but I see nothing, nothing but a handsome, endearing and sensitive boy.

“The most sensitive of his brothers, his mother rightly repeats to me over the phone, her voice broken by grief. He died a week ago, we did not know until yesterday. It's been over two months since he'd disappeared and we were left without any news of him until... and she adds, in a barely audible whisper, as if she was afraid of being heard, do not come, above all do not come, the route isn't very safe, you never know... his father went to bury him, they asked him to come alone... he hasn't come back yet.”

I am hesitant to tell my son the news. My son is there, in his bedroom. I haven't said anything to him yet. How do I announce to him that his cousin is dead? And above all, how to tell him that his cousin was a terrorist? He also will have a hard time putting a face to the name, it's been so long since we've seen each other! Will I need to tell him why we are so distant with one another? Of course, there has been this climate of insecurity since... but for how long now? Five years? Six years? It's been more than five years since we gave up all travel, except when we were obligated to. Family reunions are becoming more and more rare, the ties are stretching thin, and I measure today by the extent of the war, in weighing on our lives, has made us lose the sense of certain values that, up until now, we thought were essential. But is that the only reason? Could I speak to my son about my revolt against an older brother who, very young, wanted to exercise his authority over me and demand obedience? What's the point? All that seems so far away, and above all so trivial today! And then, I fear not being able to respond to questions that he will certainly not hold back from asking me. Certainly the same ones that I ask myself.

I try to find the first responses in rereading the article that I cut out of the paper, a short one that announces "the elimination of Sofiane B, age 20, a dangerous terrorist, struck down while he was trying, in a stolen car, to break through a roadblock at the exit of the city of M. He was not alone, but his two accomplices succeeded in fleeing and are being actively pursued at the present time..." And it specifies that he was found in possession of a revolver having

belonged to a police officer assassinated the day before, right in the center of the city. Sofiane had thus been killed twenty or thirty kilometers from his village. Did he intend to return home to see his family? Was he the assassin? That hardly seems to raise any doubt for the authors of the report.

But then, if he were really dangerous like they assure, dangerous and determined like all the others, he must have committed other crimes. And if he had not been “struck down by the police,” perhaps he would have been able to continue to strike, and who knows, maybe even kill his brother, since one of his brothers is a police officer. And suddenly, this sole hypothesis plunges me into a violent despair, unbearable, that stirs up equally unbearable deductions, and images of death, the same as those with which we are deluged daily, that cascade in my head, without my being able to stop them, nor even close my eyes in order to no longer see them. Is it possible that one of my nephews is one of them, the mere mention of whom paralyzes me and provokes a swell of hatred, fear, and revulsion? Sofiane, his face so sweet, his heart so gentle, could he have, if someone had ordered him to, killed in cold blood his brother or cousin, my son, who soon will be inducted into the army to do his national service? Perhaps my daughter also, who refuses to wear the veil and leaves every morning in jeans and sneakers to go to high school. Perhaps he had already killed other girls, other women, for this same reason, for if he had indeed chosen this path, like so many young people whom we say were lost and exploited, and I understand that better today, he had to obey the orders of his leader, he could not do otherwise! I do not

allow myself to continue any longer, I am afraid of not being able to get to the end of this reasoning, however simple, however obvious. But no, it's impossible, not him, he never could have! He loved his mother and his sisters so much, he could never have sharpened a knife to... but no, he was not a monster! And while I try to convince myself of the absurdity of all these hypotheses, I remember, as if it was possible to have forgotten it for a single instant, that all the other assassins had also been brought into the world by women, that they all had been nursed and certainly loved, perhaps poorly, but loved all the same, by mothers, like all mothers, perhaps just as sweet and unassuming as my sister-in-law, a small but feisty woman, amazingly resistant and unselfish, burdened from morning until night, her body and soul strengthened, and whose only purpose in life is to ensure the well-being of her numerous offspring, the best way she can and without a single complaint.

No, there must be an explanation! I need to understand: I cannot accept this revolting, inconceivable idea. The son of my own brother! It's certainly a misunderstanding, a tragic error that cost the life of a quiet and sweet young man, a high schooler just a few months from his final exams. Who will be able to explain to me and make me accept the idea that little boys, cheerful or shy, mischievous or wise, can one day become criminals capable of the worst monstrosities? In this case, my son himself... but I reject with a shiver of horror this thought that has just crossed my mind.

I need to understand, that's what I repeat to myself the entire way to their house. The explanation, I will certainly find it at the end of the trip, a trip that seems interminable to me, with hours of anguish before finally arriving in their little village, a village formerly without stories, whose surrounding areas are guarded by numerous military roadblocks, on the lookout, oh! They too are so young, their fingers posed on the triggers of their guns.

Fleeting glances of passersby, houses crushed by sun and silences, closed doors and shutters, where are the children who, upon the arrival of a car, used to rush up to it from all directions and group up all around us, smiling faces, pressed up against the windows, neither begging nor aggressive, simply curious? I only recognize the heat, a dry heat, dusty, oppressive, that takes hold of my throat like the feeling of abandonment, of hopelessness that seems to have invaded this little village, peaceful in appearance, once nested in the slope of a wooded hill, now bare, trees burned or cut down, like the numerous regions that we've traveled through.

The area around the house is barren. Strangely. Nothing indicates that the family is in mourning. I don't see a single one of those chairs that are normally put out on the sidewalk for seven days for men, friends, and neighbors, who usually come from all over, even from very far away, to give their condolences. I hear neither cries nor screams of women inside the silent house. So, no one came to help my brother in this ordeal, as it is customary to do always and everywhere

in our country? Fear, without a doubt, my husband explains to me, the fear of associating oneself with the family of a pariah, or of showing solidarity that runs the risk of being misinterpreted.

In the doorway, I see only the defeated face of my brother, hollowed out by a pain that at first he does not want to let me see, the pressure of his hand too heavy on my shoulder, a short moment, and then this ball of grief that finally expresses itself in tears, we cry clinging to one another, we cry at last, bonded by a suffering that makes us find, in that moment, feelings that both of us thought were dulled by the long separations and the wear and tear of life.

And that other vision: Malika, Sofiane's mother, sitting on a mattress in the middle of the big room emptied of all its furniture, Malika, her eyes dry as if infused with blood, even smaller than I remember, Malika dressed all in white, sitting in the middle of a group of women who came discreetly to surround her with their compassion, repeating in a monotonous voice, as if she were reciting a litany: "They tricked him, they dragged him away with them, he was too young, he could not understand." She says nothing else, she knows nothing else and without needing to specify, it is easy to understand whom she is referring to, who she is accusing. Her son, he was handsome, he was kind, he was innocent. They, they're the others, a mysterious and undefined entity, with the power of suggestion and an irresistible seduction, and it is their fault that today he is no longer here. She must convince herself of this to maintain the image of this child,

her favorite son she says, the only one of her sons who sometimes listened to her, and also talked to her, yet without telling him, oh no! without ever telling him what could torment him, what had been able to push him to listen to *them*, to believe *them*, to follow *them*, and she, his mother, had seen nothing, had suspected nothing, not even the slightest clue, nothing, until the day when he had left without saying anything to anyone, without taking anything with him.

They nod their heads, they approve, all these women sitting around her, and I will learn in listening to scraps of conversations that just barely reach me, that some among them have sons who also were “brought” to the resistance. They talk about it with covert words, lowered eyes, they who ordinarily do not hesitate to confide in other women, on the rare chance that they could recognize each other. It is true that I am there, that I am a stranger for them, and that one must be suspicious today. The white veil that I tied around my head in a sign of mourning does not reassure them sufficiently enough that they let go of their dangerous secrets. Alone in a corner, I observe and remain quiet; maybe the explanation that I am desperately searching for is there. It is in the sighs that accompany their words, the whispers punctuated with this constantly repeated question, “what can we do?”, a question to which not a single one of them seems to be looking for an answer and that is just an admission of this resignation irremediably inscribed in them. No one ever taught them, nor ever permitted them to simply say no, to fight against an inevitability that shatters all their dreams, to endure, to accept in silence, the father first, and then the husband, and then the son, wrenching

renunciations, sometimes so deep that they cut into the flesh, unbearable pain, accumulated by the screams that they hold back, with their entire bodies, and that they cannot expel. And these sons who grow up too quickly and in turn become men, how would they know how to hold them back?

“Sofiane was very wise, very pious,” confirms the father later once we are alone. “Very secretive also, perhaps a little too much, I should have... but I would never have thought that he...” He does not finish his sentence. Of course, what father could explain how and why his son one day became an assassin? My brother has only one explanation, the only one that can absolve him of all responsibility, and he clings to it. He must cling to it because it allows him not to ask too many questions, but above all because he needs to convince himself; he insists, he loses his temper and in his anger, indiscriminately, he accuses everyone: his other sons, his wife, his son’s friends, his professors, soldiers, the government, yes, they all share a part of the responsibility. Everyone but him. And they even claim that his son had committed multiple assassinations, some of which were stabbings! His own son! A boy who did not even know how to defend himself! Sofiane was just a timid and quiet boy who let himself be subjugated, deceived by the words and the promises of these men, known by all, who continue today, with total impunity, to walk the streets of the village, to recruit their victims in mosques without anyone suspecting them. I listen to him in silence, I cannot, I do not dare to tell him that in following his reasoning as a father, we should consider all those who kill today as irresponsible individuals, innocent

victims themselves, incapable in their blindness of realizing the horror and savagery of the crimes they commit in the name and in the place of their ideological leaders. But my brother does not need to go so far: he has found the culprits. And while he unleashes his anger like this, his suffering, his resentments, his other sons go and come around him, they do not say a word, and farther away in a corner of the room, his two daughters, holding each other tightly, also silent, seem to not even hear the words that we are exchanging. I look at Malika, her body so fragile that it is hard to believe that she could have given birth to so many children... the despair that surges from her with the slightest movements. She says to me in a murmur: "I feel like he's going to come back, he's going to come through the door, you see, he used to sit here," she points out an empty seat beside her. She speaks about her child, what will remain for her forever now that he is no longer there, a son whose absence she will never accept, a son whom she had lost well before he was killed. But that, she refuses to think about it, she refuses to talk about it, her present pain has obliterated all other pains, relegated them to a part of her memory from now on inaccessible.

It is only at night that I will be able to go, with the twin sister Amina, to go meet Sofiane. Amina, hunched up all day in a fierce and silent grief, haunted by images so violent that at nightfall she cannot close her eyes. It is she who will come to me in the knowing darkness, shaken by dry sobs, and who, in a long hiccup of despair, will try to break free, as if she were tearing away from herself, bit by bit, her fear but mostly, what she tirelessly repeats, the remorse that

devastates her today, of not having known how to hold him back, not having known how to convince him, not having listened to him, not having known to talk to him, she, the only one who could have but who had not known how, she, his sister, his double, reproaching herself until she wrecked her voice with it, having let him shut himself away for so long in a world from which he would not return. She still says that she carries with her a weight of guilt so heavy that it is unbearable to continue to live, to remember, to find him now, wherever she goes, even in closing her eyes, as if her memory and her whole being were inhabited only by this one certainty. She, living from now on in the intolerable memory of what her brother was for her, of what she was for her brother. And my own words are so flimsy and useless that they don't reach her, she can't hear them, and I understand that it's him she is speaking to. That he is inside her. That he is that gaping wound within her and that she does not know today which of the two betrayed the other.

Pressed against me, blank voice detaching itself in the trembling silence of the night, body slouching under her pain, a savage pain, almost bestial, Amina will talk for hours before closing her eyes, exhausted, to let herself sink until daytime into a sudden sleep filled with groans and jolts that nothing, neither the words that I murmur in her ear, nor the rocking that I instinctually rediscover to try to accompany her dreams, will be able to appease.

It is up to me now to pick up the thread, to reassemble piece by piece her words, her phrases, her screams, and also her silences, to blend my voice with hers to express her fear and her revolt, and my fear too. It is up to me to try to restart or understand this story, the story of this child who had wanted to prove to the world that he was a man, a real man, in taking the only path that offered itself to him, a path paved with hatred and violence, without knowing that the worst violence was that which he committed against himself.

Amina goes back as far as she can in her childhood, in their childhood, and they suddenly rise up in my memory, I see them clearly, never too far from one another, that frail little girl with dark skin and that long-haired little boy, dressed like a girl, like all the handsome little boys whom we want to protect from the evil eye until their circumcision. As children, their bond was so whole that it took some time for them to become aware of their differences, but Amina had learned to read very quickly the looks of those who watched over them. Sofiane felt so close to his sister, so similar, that he often had the impression, he had told her this one day, that she was just a part of him that had come detached in the mysterious limbo that preceded their birth. Close to him, with him, Amina wasn't afraid of anything. In evoking these happy moments of her life, Amina rediscovered, for a brief instant, the soft tone of her brother when he pronounced her name. Before. When he would call for her in crossing the doorway of the house, as if to assure himself that she was really there, she who very quickly no longer had the right to leave the house, to participate in the boys' games in the

street, and who had learned to wait, to keep quiet in front of her other brothers, to obey them, to put up with their scorn in silence, to respond without protest to the numerous nicknames they had invented for her. Only he knew how to say her name. For them, she was the black one, “Kahloucha²”. They never called her anything else because they had thus found the best way to humiliate her, and she adds, perhaps she is afraid that this detail will escape me, because that formed another part of her secret wounds, the best way to underscore the contrast between her and Sofiane, her twin brother, so much more handsome, she says it herself, no trace of jealousy in her voice, as if stating an obvious fact.

Yes, there were the others, the brothers, seven brothers, all older, and I learn, to my dismay, how they could be so arrogant and harsh with this sister, so clumsy, who was only there, who only existed, to serve them. They had all done their part in excluding her from their life and her brother’s life as well. And Sofiane, so different from them, had ended up rejoining the clan, by pretending, only pretending, she says, to detach himself from her, to be like them, to deny the love he always had for her, that incompatible weakness with his status as a man, even more difficult to bear than having an imperfection or a deformity.

They had to hide themselves to talk to each other, like lovers would, and they had developed a habit of meeting at night, without even planning it, while everyone was sleeping. During the winter in silence, in the heat and discomfort of the tiny kitchen at the end of the hallway, and during the summer, in the little

courtyard or on the terrace, stretched out side by side, dazzled by the immensity of the dark sky, towards which soared dreams that the two of them knew were unrealizable. And in the moving and gentle darkness, it was like they were rediscovering, and beyond everyone else, a little bit of that union that no one else wanted to see in them.

And then, there was the father, my brother, so strict, so demanding with his sons and particularly with this sensitive and too gentle boy whom he needed to teach to be a man; a father who only spoke to Sofiane to reprimand and humiliate him, and who had never shown even the slightest trace of affection for or interest in him; a father that Sofiane had ended up hating, fleeing from, to take refuge outside the walls of the house, near those who knew how to listen to him, who knew how to talk to him, and who had given him the illusion of understanding, in order to catch him in their nets.

Amina knew. She knew that her brother would end up running away, leaving her. He had told her. But he had also told her, he ceaselessly repeated that it was for her, because of her, and because of his mother also whom he knew was fragile, that he stayed there, that he continued to endure without resisting the authoritarianism of this man who for him was nothing more than his creator. And she had believed him because she thought she knew everything about him, she would never have thought that he could abandon her, even less betray this blind trust that she had in him.

I imagine, while Amina is speaking to me about my brother, the moment when, alone, terribly alone, he had to, with his own hands, dig his son's grave, lift his body to bury it and cover it up with dirt. What were his thoughts, his prayers at the moment of that last reunion? Did he finally speak to this son whose dreams and desires he ignored? Did he beg for his forgiveness or was he satisfied with saying a quick prayer to rest his soul? I will never know, my brother will surely continue to preserve himself, to keep to himself his torments and his regrets. I myself would not know how to find the words capable to help him cope with this suffering that he tries to hide from others like he already did before, when he was the most distant of all my brothers and the most inaccessible.

What Sofiane wanted was to escape the influence of this intransigent father, but it was also and above all to do something with his life. He felt cramped, condemned to live in this lost village, with its only horizon the neighboring city, a small town of average importance, where inhabitants of surrounding villages would turn up from time to time, alone or in groups, hungry for adventure. He had nothing, nothing to fuel his dreams and his desperately empty days. Primary school, then junior high, then high school, obligations accepted without much conviction, a very average student, not a single chance of success, he knew it, like his brothers before him, the final year of high school, that was sufficient for the ambitions of his father. His future was set out in front of him, bleak and dusty, the image of paths outlined by the steps of those who had

preceded him and whom he saw bogged down, then sink day after day, then disappear, return to dust, immediately replaced by sons exactly like them, until they deteriorated while waiting, peacefully seated in the sun, the end of their journey too slow, almost immobilized under the weight of habits and traditions that not one among them would have considered changing.

To do something with his life! Actually, they gave him the means to do it, every day they drew in front of his enthralled and naïve eyes a world where injustice would disappear, where all men would be one in the same love, the same adoration, where all the problems would be smoothed out miraculously, a utopia that they told him was attainable under certain conditions. First, the elimination of all who would want to hinder the return to original purity and would place in doubt the sacred character of a desire shared by millions of men disseminated throughout the world. How could he resist those who affirmed to him with admiration that he was part of those chosen ones, those who knew that their passing on earth was but a tiny, insignificant moment that they should consecrate in order to merit eternal happiness?

Amina did not understand very well what Sofiane said to her the nights when, exhilarated and feverish, he would recount the interminable discussions that he had with his friends and certain professors. But she let him talk, without asking questions, she was under the impression, and saying this her whole body shuddered, that it was another who was expressing himself through his mouth,

and that she herself would not have known how to respond, that he would not have heard her, and she was too afraid of losing him. What remained with her from these incoherent and restless speeches were the words, always the same, charged with violence, death, hatred, words that he dwelled on as if to help them sink in. But she was there, close to him, trying in vain to follow him, sometimes waiting for him to get out of breath in order to tell him... but what? What could she tell him to help him find himself again, she who had nothing to offer him except her poor and useless love, she who was nothing but his loyal shadow, Kahloucha, the black one, who saw him pulling away more and more without being able to hold onto him.

Sofiane left one rainy winter morning. Immediately, in finding his abandoned school bag in the corridor behind the front door, Amina understood. But all day she waited for his footsteps and thought she heard his voice calling her. At night, her mother left the door ajar so he could return, slip into the house without a sound, without waking his father, and find again his place in the bedroom next to his brothers. His place remained empty, and the following night, the father himself shut the door, without saying a single word.

“Believe, Obey, Fight”

He has hands that tremble, unbelievably so, he was just about to say to himself very firmly in his head, in the name of a clement and forgiving God, his heart on the tip of his tongue, if only she were not looking at him like that, he still cannot turn his eyes away, and the others who watch him, who wait, she has only a small iridescent tear in the corner of her eye, like a pearl, why doesn't she cry out, she does not move, he is still hesitating, how old could she be, at least a few years younger than I, my God, help me, I am a soldier of God, my God, nothing but your name in me, I don't even know her name, she moves her lips, as if she wanted to speak to me, he leans in a little more, she is on her knees, he grabs her hair to unencumber her neck, in his hands he smells the incredible sweetness of this heavy hair the color of honey and amber, the vein that palpitates at the hollow of her now exposed neck, it's really too hot, the sun casts a blinding reflection in his eyes, he tells her close your eyes, but she does not hear him, she's not even blinking, and her scent, scent of a woman, like the scent of... evil, it's from her that evil comes, all this suffering that suddenly wells back up in him, body of the devil, all of them, perverse and tempting, he pulls even harder on her unbound hair, the little tear runs down her cheek, he hears the voices of the others around him that come closer, they've finished, all is calm now, it is only him now, he must do it quickly, if at least she were screaming, struggling like the others, she wouldn't have this look anymore, standing like a blade, quickly, I am a soldier of God, we are going to destroy evil, purify the world, quickly, don't forget to recite the ritual phrase, shuddering luster of her strained neck, and lower down her

breasts, my God, your name alone in me, her gaze drowning in sunlight, this is the commandment of God, the judgement of God, he raises his hand, and at the lightning flash of the long sharpened blade, it is he who closes his eyes.

Unspeakable Body

The street is deserted and the sun relentlessly vibrates on the roofs and the motionless trees. I could also say that it's hot out. I could continue and say the light, too. Unbearable. Open eyes. The white heat.

The deserted street, motionless sun. Skip the verbs. Hop over them. Free oneself from the verb. They're what weigh down the words inside, I mean inside of me. A teeming heap in my stomach. Imprisoned. Can never get out. The words of men are dirty. They are in their eyes. Acrid taste. Venom of hatred deep down within their silences. Within their gazes.

They have these gazes sometimes. Spurting. That's it. With the filth that oozes from their whole being. With even filthier fear and hatred. A whole body of horror. You've understood nothing. But you will need to.

Spout the words as they are. Dirty. Revolting. They pour out of me like vomit. An excretion. That's it. They spurt out, splash me, fill the room with their stench. Expelled without a sound they crawl on the ground. In procession. Cockroaches, wings stuck to their bodies. Leave a shiny viscous trail before disappearing. Look, Louisa is my mother's name. It was. No longer there. Nothing but ashes. Or smoke. Search for her trace but I must forget that too. He said that. You have to forget. Forget where. Nothing happened. Excise. No, it's not that. Exorcise he said. Extirpate the bad. He says a lot of words like that when

he comes, the doctor. Search, search again. Sometimes it's all white. Inside. Or black. The same. I change.

Time to find. Find the word. Choose it and hold onto it. Move the others aside with both hands. They're marching away now. Silence. But petrified soldiers come out of the silence. I shouldn't have. Start again. Restart it all. Period. At school, you erase. So little, I went to school. Book bag and white socks. Well-behaved, that's it. All little girls are well-behaved. That's what I can say. Without pain. All the words like that... Table Notebook Eraser Pencil Desk Reading Lesson "Selma and Nabil go to school." So quietly. Not them. I go so quietly. Me. She walked in the streets, the little girl. Fair and golden. The little girl. The streets. The sun gently on her. I know all that. Listen. Watch. Read the name embroidered on the apron. My name is Katia. I'm 17 years old. I know that.

Come back to school. I only know children. Birds also. I she sings with them. Little girl with braids, Katia plays hopscotch on the sidewalk. Played. Cross of chalk.

The petrified Soldiers do not play. They march and believe that they advance. Came from the night they watch me. They go. In tight rows exhumed from the earth stamping from their shadow the gentleness of the mornings. Distress.

I also played in the sand. Played at making a hole. A big hole with my hands. Very far. To sink into the center of the earth. Humid. Arid. Even farther than that. To hide myself from pretending, I used to say before. Before.

Play at burying myself on the beach. Even my head. The sand flows over me. Little grains. Sparks. Vibrate and leave my hands. And also on my hair. In my mouth. Breathe. I can't. How do all the others do it? Try again. Need to close my eyes. Leave me. I do not want to play at that. The little girl disappeared. Chase away all these words.

Try the word Window. Absolutely straightforward. Inoffensive. Absorb the word until it lets the light pass through. It's done. Now I can see. Outside the trees tremble. Motionless time. Like just before. It's still hot. Maybe it's summer. Or something else. The heat trickles and flows away from me. Snakes and slips. Long sticky trails. Again. She is going to come clean. Sorry.

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*Ya khti waalech. Waalech?** He opens the door. He bangs his forehead against the wall. Very hard. Several times. Wants to hurt himself too. Why? That's my brother Rachid. His memory returns abruptly and clearly to me. One after another. Why? I want to say why he screams. Cries. A man who cries. Silence. Soldiers petrified until the day. I don't want to. He wasn't there when. That night. Why? He says I don't want to see her like that anymore. Why? *Waalech?* He said that and then. His words, I can't put them together. I have to close the door.

* My sister. Why?

*

I start again. The wall first. No. That word hurts me. Too hard. Look for the fissure. Nothing but a crack in the middle. Every day a little deeper. Like a tattoo. Too complicated. But it's there. Crack, that's it. Made a little deeper by my gaze on it. I do to it what I want. Eyes ravaged by the force. One by one I remove the scales. I descend. I am the crack. I cling to the dry walls. In the back on the bed of rocks I sleep. Burrow in the rocky ground. Become embedded.³ Splinters also. Pay attention, you're going to hurt yourself. She said that, my mother. All the time. But she didn't know. You hear! I'm finished. Should restart now.

Alright. After? I'm looking. Rest.

Go on, open your eyes now. No one. They are going to come. It's time. They leave me there, all day, door closed, and then they come. I listen. The voice of my brother. Him again. Flattened against the wall. Rough voice. Preaching. From the other side of the wall. He doesn't enter. Doesn't want to see me like this. What are they all up to? All from the other side of the wall. Play dead. I died days ago. They don't know. They think I'm sleeping. Days ago.

The petrified Soldiers do not move. Crouched in the night they do not speak. Or rather. I must not listen to their voices. Even if they fill my head like the noise of the sea in a shell. They drag their huge shoes on the wet sand. More

traces. If the sea knew! It rears up and and rushes onto the abandoned beaches.

For that maybe. But no one knows. No one moves.

Whatever you do don't move, they said.

Don't speak.

Can't speak. Don't know how anymore.

The remaining sunlight burns my cheek. Heat rocks like a kiss. They are going to come soon to tell me open my eyes now. Open eyes in the night. What's the point of doing that. My night is too heavy. Sinks into my eyelids. Can't open my eyes. It's still nighttime. In my voice, too, I want to say I don't know anymore. It's sunken in me and no longer wants to come out. There is nothing left.

*

I had to sleep. A little bit. Or for a long time, what could that do? Come back very gently. On tiptoe. Careful there are people surrounding me. They are there. They, they're home. I am not home. Don't know this house. Don't know these people. It's their smell. I know. A cloud around me. Intoxicating smell, but barely. Like before rain. Smell and sound soaked in tears. They're still crying. Without a sound. What's wrong with all of them? Light touch of their voices above me. Bat wings. I know. They're there. Their words make little holes in the cloud. They try to pierce the envelope but it's all hazy. Limp. Downy. The one who cries softly takes my hand. She wants to tell me. What? She too, she says: we

can't leave her like that. I hear her words. I can move, too. Sometimes I can move my hand. Nothing else. So that they go away. Leave me alone in my night. They are there around me. Someone says she moved. The cloud draws closer and surrounds me. Too much. I suffocate. There is that woman and her smell, so strong that it steeps the whole house to the walls. Or the opposite. Don't know this house. Don't know this smell. How to say it? Hot and a little sweet with the sour and clammy stench of a woman. In wafts. On the other side it's her sister. That's what she says. She says don't be afraid we are here. She says my little one, my poor little one but that's not my name. Her smell is less hot. Less sweet. More oily. But they look like each other a little bit. The smells. Mixing above me. There is also the smell of a man. Him I recognize. He does not speak but I know that he is there. Smell of aftershave, not the same as Rafik's, my love, my love. Rafik's smell comes back. Rushes into me like a storm. I only need to let myself slip into it. In this smell wild with a male's desire who knows to hold himself back. We both said that so as to not let ourselves falter. Tightropes on the edge of pleasure. But be careful, they are there. And the man standing near me is not Rafik. Don't go looking for him. Not necessary. He wouldn't come back anyway. Why? *Waaalech?* He is still there standing, in my memory. Rafik. Only him.

The standing man who is not him makes his voice soft and his hands gentle on me. There they are all together above me. They say open your eyes we are here. Again! As if I didn't know. No need to open my eyes. For it's every day like this. They come. Stay a moment. And they say open your eyes because they want me to. It's what they want. Not me. But the man says don't insist, leave her.

We listen to him. Sounds of steps toward the door. A bit of air on my face. He often says words like that... Undo the knot. Or even more, the time... let the time go. Like a song. With my physician hands, with his hands also he tries. On my forehead. On my hair. Grating. Sparks. My skin is bristly with points of fire. Burning, maybe. He quickly pulls back his hands before I...

My body is this: a charred piece of twisted wood. Disintegrates when you touch it. Specks of ashes. On the other side the forests drown in the pallid fog.

Run save yourself do not go back. Dense Timber Forest, Thicketed underbrush I know it all. I must travel the dark paths all alone. Still more words—labyrinth to cross all alone to the edges of my cuts. One two three sun. Clearing. Stop. No! Do not go back! They are gone. Empty. You must close the door.

Save all the exits. To prevent the shadows from penetrating in me. Their contorted faces already materialize on the walls on the ceiling. Maybe even crawl under the door. To not let the daylight go out. But I cannot postpone the night, so insidious, so dark. Can just stop the fear from spreading in the bedroom. I say this word Fear and let it flow in me until I am full of it. Let myself live by fear so as not to forget. It's in the night that they come. Leave their putrid hideaways. Burning embers of their eyes in the heart of the night. They burned my house. And all the rest. Everything. There is nothing left. Nothing but me.

Can't even unfold my legs anymore. Leave this body that's no longer mine. Gently. The white birds spread their wings before soaring up towards the

sky. Useless. I can't do that. I stay stuck to the ground. Never could. But I wanted to. In the time of love. With Rafik. Us. I believed I could. My love. I have nothing but that. My love beats in time in my stomach. Gives me rhythm and exiles me. Beyond that. Buried in my genitals. At the very bottom. Can't take that away from me.

They don't have the right. Not them. They don't say that but it's there. The same shudder in their genitals. *H'chouma**. The same goes for words. Gestures. And they all have that in their eyes. Thrust in us their hard gaze, straight like a stake. Everywhere. Spears. Pious. The same word.⁴ Stop that hurts.

I can't tell them all that.

Start again from the beginning. The very beginning of the story. Maybe that.

The blue sky. The little girl. So little. When she walked little thing dressed in pink uncertain and strange. Cried when she fell so that someone would come pick her back up. They were there. Father mother. Always. Never hurt. Played with dolls. Rigid bodied doll dislocated body. And then she learned words. Repeated them to make them enter her so she possessed them. Attentive. Diligent student. Words to construct the world like rocks added one by one. To share in the secret of things. And to take. The first word learned: *aâtini* give me. Give me.

* *H'chouma*: shame

Everywhere I went. Desire to take and to learn maybe even more. Put myself back in this strange and awkward body. Extend my hand for someone to give me.

Aâtini... Not for someone to take me. I wanted.

They ended up taking me. Wherever I go even the earliest and farthest in my childhood I find them. Always there buried in me. The petrified Soldiers entrenched in my body, in my memory. They came, took me. Their breath, their hands on me, body torn.

Knocked me down alone on the dark paths. Search. Search again in the middle of the brambles. Oh mother *ya yemma laâziza* I searched for you called in the depths of the forest. Eyes closed. Can't say your name anymore. Name of mother on my lips in sobs exuded from all the pores of my devastated body.

I come from very far away. Even farther than the irreparable. The unspeakable. Lips now sealed.

It's night now. Night buzzes from too much silence. Left me alone. Can no longer hold back the memories that roll out their procession. Can't follow them. Stay there behind the door. I wait for them my eyes open. Can't come anymore they told me. Too late. Already came. Took me away torn limb from limb. Piece by piece I must find myself. Can't. They are there. Everywhere in me.

In my slashed feet my lacerated legs my torn genitals my lashed stomach
my mutilated breasts stranger's body of mangled flesh.

It's like that making the words come out of me. But I can't speak
anymore. I lost my voice. Rigid bodied doll dislocated. Not only that. She wants
nothing more from this unspeakable body.

Let the decomposed body rot. Entirely purulent.

Nothing but these words in me that come into my head colliding hurting
me clinging to the walls reverberating in distant echoes hurting me have to stop
them, that's what it's like building a dam rock by rock added one by one to
prevent them from penetrating.

And If We Talked About Something Else?

She had already been quiet for a long time. She is not listening to them anymore. She has the feeling of being isolated, surrounded by a thick layer of fog that the words can no longer pass through. If only she could get up from the table, invoke a sudden feeling of dizziness, leave, go back home and not leave again. That's it, shut herself away, with a sign on the door, please do not disturb, temporary closure due to saturation, the threshold of tolerance being greatly exceeded. But she knows that she will never have this courage, not even enough to say out loud what she feels at this precise moment.

Nine people. There are nine people around her, men and women, sitting together in the large dining room generously lit by the sun that penetrates through the open windows. After the meal, like usual, upon moving to the living room, the women will withdraw themselves in order to speak more freely. For now, they are together, comfortably settled for a meal that, while proclaimed very enjoyable, is entirely the same as the tens of meals shared at one house or another, taking turns, just as custom requires. There are only people there belonging to the same world, a longtime group of friends, sharing the same ideas, the same fears and the same distressing uncertainties. But now it's been over an hour that they've been at the table, over an hour that they have not changed the subject of conversation. Hanya feels like this could continue indefinitely, each one has his word to say, her story to tell. She has always heard this, so why can she no longer tolerate these words? This is always how it happens. They start with usual pleasantries, first how the children are doing, ah! Problems with teaching, like a whole file that they leaf

through rather quickly before moving on to the weather, very cold or too hot according to the season, they make a little detour by other problems, the high cost of living, for example, do you realize, everything is unaffordable these days, where are we going, it's enough to say it like that to convince themselves of it, despite the unchanged abundance of the meals that bring them together, and then, once they finish the hors d'oeuvres, they dig into the main course, with an accompaniment of the last bits of news gleaned from the papers or from well informed people whose names they will not mention. Then they start the death count, the stories of the last massacres, the last armed conflicts, and they don't forget a single detail, in dwelling even sometimes on the most gruesome, as if they can't help but give into some kind of deadly pleasure. The stories follow, it's almost like they try to outdo each other. They recount the truly staggering state of affairs, without forgetting how each of them must compliment the hostess for the quality of her meal. One after the other, like one would tell simple anecdotes, they throw themselves into the description of scenes far exceeding anything that one could imagine in the genre of horror. And, curiously, as if they were taking part in the improbability of a reality that is sometimes very close, the words, while terrible, seem on the contrary to accentuate this feeling of nonreality, and the screams of the tortured, the gutted or decapitated bodies are but images that they refuse to look at for too long. They pass the salt or the mustard with the backdrop of stories worthy of appearing in a book of records open specially for this intention. And the exclamations that burst out from time to time seem to bear witness to a certain curiosity, the same morbid curiosity that pushes some readers

to look in the papers only for the page of minor news items, with a preference for the bloodiest. They want to know, know everything, to be able to recount themselves later on, recount the same stories, with the same abundance of details, in front of another audience that is also fond of stories. There is the inevitable part for rumors, the “apparently,” inevitable because of the silence imposed by the media, rumors amplified often by design or by a taste for the sensational, she doesn’t really know, without a doubt to make an impression. And it is perhaps in this space left to doubt that reason finds a lifeline that prevents it from sinking. Because, inexorably, escalation follows, enlivened occasionally by precisions that make the women shiver for just a few moments, before they plunge back into their daily worries. Always the same, because life continues despite everything, it must, mustn’t it, and quickly, as if to protect itself from a dangerous and sometimes difficult to manage emotion, the women must return to their discussions, during which, for the umpteenth time, the men attempt, without too much conviction, to analyze, explain, reason, understand.

Hanya continues to eat, to bring to her lips little pieces of meat that she cuts with minutia, the essential being that she seem absorbed, entirely concentrated on this delicate operation. Thinking about raising her eyes every now and then, doing her best not to have too empty a gaze. She feels her husband’s eyes on her, she lowers her head a little more, her plate is almost empty now, and it’s a question of not having anyone notice. Strange what happens to her now, although she is used to it, it’s been years now, how many, four, five years,

always the same people, always the same stories, with a few variants, but she has never felt such a horror, such a desire to... to what? To scream, to tell them to shut up, no, she has never felt such disgust. Yet, usually, at each one of these meals, at her house or elsewhere, Hanya is not content with listening, it happens that she, too, talks about what she's read in the papers, or what she's heard around her. Like them all, she talks about those things with carefully controlled detachment, above all not appearing too moved or shocked, no one would understand. Like everyone else, she thought that the words so often repeated do nothing but try to give a semblance of order in a reality so chaotic, and so they struggle to keep all their lucidity in order to try to understand, to put things into perspective, to talk about it, at least to not lose control, and at the same time, to convince themselves that it is truly real. And that is why, despite the murderous madness that ravages the country, despite the fear that assails them from the moment when they leave their homes, every day, and the ever present temptation to give up on everything, to hide away, to not expose themselves, or as little as possible, they continue to work, to bring their children to school every morning, to come together, like today, as if nothing had changed in their lives. They have only changed a few of their habits, taken a few precautions, acquired a few reflexes, often ridiculous, they know, but that are enough to give them strength, imaginary but necessary to face each day, each hour of their life.

Hanya tries to understand what is happening to her. For so long she had thought she was desensitized. Of course, at the beginning, like everyone, she

reacted violently, she cried, and each death announced, each assassination left her a little more wounded, a little more helpless. Without having received direct threats, she felt constantly in danger, and was living, like everyone, in perpetual anxiety without any respite. She was afraid for herself, for her husband, for her children, for all her loved ones. She continues to be afraid, but she is used to her fear, she has succeeded in keeping it on a leash, to the point of forgetting about it sometimes, until close gunfire or the roar of the explosion of a bomb causes it to resurface, intact and all-consuming. Her heart always trembles when the phone rings late at night or too early in the morning, a hesitation before opening the newspaper, from a fear of finding the name of one of her friends in the obituary column. The list is already so long, and certainly not yet finished, but the revolt, the truth, what had pushed her to go out into the streets with the other women, on a sunny day in March, against the advice of all her loved ones, of her husband first of all, you're crazy, you don't realize, it's dangerous, someone could recognize you, and who had seen her come back home having lost her voice from screaming all kinds of slogans, carried by what she had later considered a sort of catharsis, that revolt has become dull, leaving little by little room for... how to say it, not exactly indifference, but more a sort of habit, as if the excess itself of suffering and distress had ended up annihilating all reaction in her. She even surprises herself sometimes by asking herself if she hadn't lost something essential, the ability to react correctly, and if, for this reason, she herself hasn't become a little less human. Yes, she often asks herself that question, and then she finds herself in that moment submerged by a wave of disgust so powerful that it

transforms into an irrepressible anger. Anger with herself first, with this absence of a reaction, this silence for so many years, this complacency, all these subterfuges, this need she has to want to slip into this image that she wants to give herself, attentive, available, exactly what is needed, and most importantly not distinguished by some originality or an untimely radiance, which would be unforgivable for a woman, yes, to fit herself into a mold that had already started to crack, she felt it but she believed herself to be strong enough to seal the holes... and now it cracks as a result of this anger that she cannot prevent from turning on the others.

“And if we talked about something else?” She yelled. She realizes this at the same moment that the words pass over her lips. She does not recognize that voice, she surprises herself with this curious stridency that causes a panic in all their eyes, an astonishment that freezes all movements and interrupts all conversations.

Around her she has nine flabbergasted people, that's the word that comes to mind when looking at them, flabbergasted as if she had let out a high C in a way that was as unexpected as it was unusual. She had almost wanted to laugh at their expressions, she would have certainly laughed in other circumstances, but her exasperation only grew when she met the irate eyes of her husband, he did not take too much time to get a grip on himself, of course, he already has to think about the manner in which to frame things, to recapture or even to explain this

incomprehensible, excessive reaction, to excuse her in the eyes of the others, yes, we are all worked up, who wouldn't be with "what is happening" in our country, an established formula now because the words to say what is happening have yet to be invented, all in promising to have a talk with her as soon as they were home, perhaps even before, in the car, as soon as they drive off. She reads all that with one feature of his eyes, in the way he knits his brow, oh, she knows it well, she can make out words before they even reach his lips, she even finishes his sentences sometimes. The moment he makes a gesture in her direction, without saying anything, she gets up and goes to sit in one of the armchairs in the living room, firmly turning her back on them.

Leïla rushes over immediately, she leans over to her and takes her hand, "So, Hanya, tell me, what's wrong? You're not well? Are you not feeling well?" She has a glimmer of worry in her eyes. Hanya likes her. She immediately wants to reassure her, to apologize. How easy that would be, it's true, she was not feeling very well, she could very well tell her: don't worry, it's nothing, in a moment it will all be better, I need to be alone for a few minutes, she has the sentences all ready in her head, even the tone with which she would like to say them, a mournful tone, in order to better convince her, to pretend, even, but it's too much for her, the words remain stuck in her throat, but she knows very well that Leïla is a gentle soul, that her concern is not feigned, even if she is deeply irritating her in this moment.

No, she cannot say anything, or do anything either, and it's that powerlessness that makes her tremble now, from head to toe, from a rage that she must contain at all costs, because she really does not know anymore who she will take it out on or how it will appear without a specific target. What right does she have to ask her friends to keep quiet? She only has to decline the invitation. She knew, yesterday already in reading the paper, she had anticipated the comments of the day, she had identified the articles that would be picked up almost word for word by one or another of the guests. "Another massacre of civilians in the Blida region," "Horrible butchery in a small village: thirty-two people slaughtered, including fourteen women and three children," these were the titles of the headlines, found on page two, she read the articles in their entirety, without even trembling, just before going to get the children at school, she did not forget a single detail, the screams, the victims' pleas, the colors also, the reddish water that ran under the door of the morgue, the white linens covering the cadavers, the blue sky, yes, even the sky, the dirty gray trucks transporting the bodies, the dumpsters, the journalists are doing good work, they inform, at least when they can, all is carefully described, all that is lacking is the odor, but maybe that will come one day, this country is already in a state of decomposition, and that's what she had read until the end, she had not been able to stand hearing it, as if the voice of a man was giving another reality to the words and conjuring up, in an even more crude way, this intolerable reality. She could not reproach them for reading the paper, attaching themselves to the most sordid details and images, but she remembers having thought in listening to this account, of the terrible contrast

between the policed atmosphere of the meal, the impeccable tidiness of this sort of cocoon that they find themselves in, and the savagery of the scenes evoked.

Hanya feels Leïla's hand on her hair, a light caress that is intended to be soothing. If only she could sleep, there, immediately, and not wake up until the nightmare is over, because the most terrible dreams are those that you believe when you are awake. How much time would it take to get out of this bad dream, and even if they did get out, how much time would it take to forget it? All these people hastily buried, very quickly forgotten, how many exactly, we round the numbers, what's one life more or less in a country entirely bloodless, populated by men and women whom fear and selfishness have made almost dead and blind to the suffering of others.

Hanya and Leïla keep quiet, without a doubt closer in their silence than they had ever been. Hanya knows that she does not need to apologize. That she does not even need to find the words to explain. That all she could say would not make sense of the immeasurable suffering of the men and women attacked, maybe even at this precise moment, by executioners with nothing human left in them. She also knows that at this moment, Leïla is being confronted with the same images, that she must feel the same powerlessness, the same despair. They are without a doubt among the thousands who every day try to find a distraction in their daily routine, faced with the danger of the madness that surveils them. What else could they do? Maybe it is in this way that together they resist terror in the

face of death that is sown around them, without discernment, without any logic. She remembers the words of one of her old classmates from college, a French professor, a poet too on his own time, whom she ran into a few days before his death, assassinated while going to buy his newspaper, like that, the daily routine. We must continue, he said, act as if tomorrow is possible, and he knew he was being threatened... She understands better today, yes, words are essential. But saying things in this way, detaching from them, continuing to do that, as if trying at all costs to preserve a space for “normal” life, even though this space is shrinking day after day, to the point where it suffocates, is that really what will save them? That allows them to survive, nothing more, to go on hoping not to find on their path a car bomb or one of those infernal machines that reduce an entire population by terror. As for the rest... No, she does not know how to pray.

Hanya is alone now. Leïla got up, she went to rejoin the others. Around the table, the conversations have started up again, snippets of sentences reach her, that she does not try to understand. It seems to her that the voices are muted, like when you find yourself at the bedside of a sick person whom you must not disturb. Hanya understood now that her scream was nothing but the expression, perhaps too strong, of this feeling of guilt that often rises up within her when she finds herself rightly trying to live normally, as if her laughs and the rare moments of happiness that she extracts from life every now and then were a sort of betrayal, an offense to the memory of all the dead with unknown faces, who come nearly every night to haunt her dreams. And this question that she ceaselessly asks

herself: what to do? How to fight, struggle against an enemy also with an unknown face, how to resist? How to stand up against the terror... if not refusing to let it invade every moment of her life, but without denying it? Yes, it seems to her that she understands now. And suddenly, she sees again, like candid Polaroids, images of those young girls in the streets, facing the fear, heads covered and legs bare—bravery or imprudence?—, those couples walking hand in hand, locked in their love as if inside a bubble, impermeable to all the ugliness that encircles them, those groups of young people who no matter where, no matter what moment, improvise songs and dances under the amused eyes of onlookers, those children who fill the streets with their shouts and their carefreeness when they leave their school, and other images too, even stronger ones that overlay the others, lines of men and women of all ages arrived en masse at the hospital to give their blood immediately after the explosion that had devastated their neighborhood, and those young girls too, those women who threw their nicest blankets from the balconies to the bottom of their building to cover the victims' bodies, all those images, simple and wonderful at the same time, the strength of which she had never realized until this day, images of a life that come to mind irresistibly, in the most unexpected moments, like a spring that would find its way under heaps of mud.

Hanya gets up. It is her turn to rejoin the others. She will not ask them to keep quiet, to talk about something else. She'll simply sit with them, listen to them talk, recount, put words to an unbearable reality that would be even more so

if it had been refuted by silence. Catching her even more surprised husband's eye, she smiles. She remembers her friend, the assassinated poet, who searched for words under the ash of days. Let the words speak, he said, and act as if tomorrow were possible.

The Matchmaker

It's my turn to speak now, Sir^{*}. What an honor it is for me to see you here, in this room that dishonors you! But that is not to say that you would have knocked on my door in vain. I know where to find that creature that haunts your dreams, troubles your nights and brings you to me trembling like an adolescent. I know exactly what you need... Who better than I would know how to describe for you exactly how I saw her, not very long ago, bathing her body, smoother than marble in the city's hammam? Imagine... the body of a gazelle, supple, slender, oh, slightly the color of copper! Cheeks like rose petals and hair as soft as silk, more black than the wing of a crow spreading out in the sky. And her eyes, Sir, eyes of a doe, sitting below eyebrows so fine that you would believe they were traced by a paintbrush, a gaze sharper than the stroke of an arrow, hidden by long lashes, like a palm tree delicately folding in the wind. Let me continue! Don't you feel the perfume emanating from her body? A subtle perfume, captivating, of musk and amber in a garden planted with jasmine... Beware he who draws too near! It's that smell, I'm sure of it, that soaks your nostrils and makes your mustache quiver... She alone will be all the women you have ever dreamed of possessing... Incense of your nights, light of your days! Your eyes are clouding up, Sir, and your breathing seems faster... Your desire is rising, I can feel it, and your burning breath is suffocating me. Do you want some cold water? Here, it's water from the well, as pure as this young girl who will be yours one day, on my

^{*} The Arabic word in Bey's original text is *Sidi*, which, as she explains in a footnote, translates to *Monsieur/Seigneur* in French.

word! As soft as the velvet on this seat that your hands are caressing feverishly. Ah! Your eyes are closing. It's she that you see under your lowered eyelids. She is there, standing in front of you, her head covered in a transparent veil, diaphanous. She waits... Should I stop talking now? Maybe you hear her voice, like the crystalline shiver of water that flows in the river on a spring morning. And the melodious jingling of her silver *khelkhals** on her ankles, sweeter to your ear than the sound of gold pieces in your wallet, is it reaching you? There... she kneels in front of you. You could almost touch her... no! Don't move! Keep your eyes closed for a second! Visions disappear as soon as you believe you can grasp them... But yes, she will be yours, if it is the will of God almighty! What family would not be honored to unite with a man as eminent as you? I have had to accomplish missions much more difficult and delicate than this one, and thank God, all who have resorted to me could only praise me for my services, you know well, you who came here! Know once again that you will not have knocked in vain on this door! So much youth and so much beauty has never been known to another... Why should you content yourself, to the end of your days, with your wife who today is nothing but flabby and worn out flesh? Yes, I know, she is the mother of your children. She gave you sons who are now men, may God protect them, and daughters more beautiful than their mother ever was at their age. God makes sure they honor their father and marry men from good families, as good and as generous as you! I already have an idea about that, and we will talk about it again when the right moment comes, if you want. But it's a question of you now.

* Gold or silver ankle bracelets

No, it is not said that a tree with green branches and a trunk saturated with sap will be prematurely doomed in the rigors of winter! Our beloved prophet, praise be upon him, did he not take, in the prime of his life, the sweet and young Aïcha for his wife, beautiful among the most beautiful? I myself, nothing but an old sac of tired useless bones, I was sixteen when I became the second wife to a man older than my father. But, you see, God did not grant me the good fortune to have children, and it is for that reason that I was very quickly repudiated. That is why I live alone, as you can see, occupying myself solely with making those who deserve it happy. But yes, I know very well, you are not going to repudiate your wife! She is a very pious wife, a remarkable woman, I say it often. She will understand, how could it be otherwise? A man as respectable as you should not have to go to the neighboring city once a month to look for what satisfies his desires! Don't divert your eyes! Nothing could be more normal! The mother of your children has been tired of the games of love for a very long time now and does not share your bed anymore, I know. We women do not have the same desires and the same needs as you, fortunately... You seem surprised, Sir? You're not aware of this, maybe, but I know everything, I see everything, even what is hidden behind the thickest walls, the most massive doors. I am what one could call the ear and the memory of this city. That makes you smile... Do you know that I hear at night the footsteps of the drunk man who stumbles while returning home, welcomed by his wife who will know how to hold in her cries if he beats her, for fear of a scandal. I am old, but my vision is keen as that of an eagle and I see furtive signs exchanged between lovebirds on indiscreet terraces at midday,

when all is deserted and you would have to be crazy to take a step out under the burning sun. God is my witness, I do not mean harm, but it is my duty to warn betrayed spouses, dishonored fathers and young people, abused and naïve, all of them, easy prey for us women. I go from house to house and everyone knows me, everyone fears me. I assemble the threads of my work patiently, tirelessly, and there is no family that has not come into my web. How many of them I have saved from dishonor and disgrace! How easy it would be for me to cite all the names, to tell you... Sometimes it is good to open the eyes of those who do not see! What does it matter to me if certain people turn away when I approach, for fear that I will unveil their corruption, and if the windows close when I pass by! No one here could tell better than I what the silent patios and dark bedrooms hold. I know, however, how to be as silent as the grave... You remain quiet, Sir? A man like you has nothing to fear aside from the anger of God! Your hands are shaking, Sir, is it from impatience? It is true that I digress... You did not come all the way to me to hear my ramblings. No, you can be assured, I did not forget what brought you here. I will go first thing tomorrow to inquire. I know whose daughter the girl is. And I also know, by a thousand tricks, how to get all the information I desire. And if she is not already promised, nothing could prevent her from being yours. Are you not one of the most respected and richest men in the city? And this money that you have accumulated for so many years which you hide carefully in a coffer of which only you know the location, better that it serves you to achieve your dreams and soften your nights, than be squandered by your sons after your death! Oh, yes, you will certainly know how to make her happy,

much better than a young, hot headed, clumsy idiot! That she is nubile and younger than the youngest of your daughters, what does that matter if that is your wish! I tell you, the day is not far when she will step through the doorway of your house, the day when, dressed in a white wedding dress, you will go find her in the bridal bedroom! Ah, I still remember ceremonies from the past! I even remember your first wedding. I see you again, Sir, walking in the streets of the city, head held high, proud and straight as only men of your moral fiber can do... That you dragged your heart behind you, without knowing it! And if you had lent an ear, you would have heard the sighs of beautiful women behind closed blinds! You do not know, you, the man, what can happen in the dark women's quarters as soon as the doors close and the night arrives like a candle snuffer! It was so long ago that nights were only for sleeping, for relaxing tired limbs, and above all for forgetting... Nights at that time were penetrated by suffocated screams, clumsy movements, acute fears, and not always innocent games... and the early mornings so often distressed... Ah! I see that you're blushing, Sir... And that light in your eyes... Were you having a memory of some dream? Only dreams allow us to go all the way to our limits... Were you dreaming, Sir, do you remember it? That you entered the bedroom where your sisters were sleeping, in those torrid summer nights, when open doors and windows did not let in a single breath of cool air, not even the slightest breeze. You were dreaming about when you lingered to gaze at their bare legs and their sleeping bodies. And it is in the unconsciousness of a dream that you approached the youngest one among them, the most beautiful, too... it was in a dream still that you laid down next to her to breathe in her scent

and listen to her peaceful breath and that you rubbed yourself against her to your immense pleasure. She was so beautiful! A gazelle's body barely formed, small breasts of alabaster... Beautiful, soft, asleep, defenseless... Where are you going? Stay! You're going to listen to me! Above all, don't be afraid, dreams are made to be buried in the depths of our consciousness. It even happens that you forget them upon opening your eyes in the morning! Fear nothing, *Si El Hadj*^{*}, your piety has cleansed you of everything. Are you not the most respected man in the city? Who would lend an ear to the ramblings of a crazy old woman? *Mahboula*^{**}, that's what they call me here, and the children who don't run away when they see me throw rocks while mocking me, with neither pity nor consideration for my age! Your poor sister never had to suffer through that. Your mother kept her carefully locked away. God pitied her, the poor soul, and called her to him so early! Not a single spell succeeded in chasing away the demons that possessed her body. All the prayers and attempts at exorcism were in vain... She was so beautiful... It was a real pity to see her wither away without knowing why! But it was written that she would never be a woman and even the blood of menstruation that rids us of impurities could never flow from her wounded body! And no one ever knew why! The nights I spent next to her with your mother, that saintly woman, may she rest in peace now, nights upon nights spent imploring God that he chase away from her sick spirit, the senseless visions that made her scream with terror and the extravagant frenzy that came out of her mouth! So it goes, you see... Even the

* A title given to those who have accomplished the pilgrimage to Mecca.

** An informal term to designate a woman touched by insanity.

most well kept secrets escape someday... Yes, you never know which cracks they can slip through. So much suffering for dreams! She finally found peace, the poor soul! But... What's wrong? Are you suffocating, Sir? It's true that it suddenly became very hot in this room. All the accumulated heat strikes again at the end of the day. Let me open the window, we will have a little more air! No? You're right, we should not let anyone find us and especially not hear what you have to tell me. You say nothing? But no, it is not yet time for you to leave! We still have so many details to work out! Rest assured, I did not forget, even if my mind wanders from time to time. It's that I am very old, you see... You won't be upset with me if the memories reawaken without me having recalled them... It's God who guided your steps toward me. And this young woman... Yes, this young woman who will help you find yourself again, you say, a little bit of youth that escapes you, you want her as young and as pure as your sister was, um, no... I mean your wife, the first time you had her. Do you remember that? You had never seen her before. I was there, yes! It was I who had accompanied her to the bedroom on the night of your wedding and who had the first proof of her virginity. Do you remember the moment when you took off her veil to uncover her face? Your surprise at her frightened doe eyes and her silky hair highlighted with ebony? And her body, that unruly and frightened body that you had to tame, not without trouble? Ah if only you could, with just your male strength, tame just as well the senseless ideas and impure images that torment even the wisest of women! May God pardon me if I blaspheme, but He should have never given women the power to dream, to love, to desire... for that is what permits them to

escape from men! Ah! The world would have been so different! Alas, the hand of man will never be able to silence dreams! You yourself, do you know what was hiding behind the smooth and opaque face of your wife, as hermetic as the doors behind which you keep her closed, whenever you straddle her like you would have straddled a well-trained horse? It's true, she never reared up on her hind legs. A treasure of patience and silent kindness and an exemplary mother! Yes, it is she who I give as an example to all the impatient and capricious young women who come to tell me that they are tired of husbands who can no longer satisfy them. And there are a lot of them today, many more that you would believe! Times have changed, alas! Oh, they are submissive and virtuous in appearance, but do I need to remind you, the most solid of barriers and the highest of walls cannot conquer the duplicity of a woman. They are beautiful, young, but on top of everything, insatiable... and it is difficult to please them. Especially when the vigor of the man who believes he possesses them is nothing more than an illusion maintained with aphrodisiacs and other miraculous recipes! Oh well...! All the treasures of the world would not be enough to hold back the time that passes! But... you seem so tired, Sir, you are having trouble getting up. Here, take your cane. It is time for you to go rest. And most importantly, be very careful, the night is falling and the streets are not well lit! Go, and do not forget me in your prayers..."

When He is Gone, She Dances

Is it already too late? Her two hands around her face, she tries to erase the creases around the corners of her lips, to go back in time. In the fragment of a mirror that she just dug out from its hiding place, she assures herself that no wrinkles surround her eyes.

She gets up. In the exact center of the room, she removes all her clothing one by one.

She is naked.

She unfolds her legs in slow arabesques and in her hips the triumphant air of her youth still flutters. From her magician hands escape birds in light shivers and their wings softly caress her face.

When he is gone, she dances.

When daybreak falls on the windows, the pale light drifts sideways onto the walls.

One by one, she removes her clothing and makes a veil of darkness from her flowing hair.

The windows are high and the doors are closed. He thinks she's a prisoner. He put bars on her dreams and iron balls on her life. Each morning, he brings the keys with him. He only comes back at night.

He does not know, no, he does not know that with this single act he liberates her. When he is gone, she dances, and the day belongs to her. Night too, sometimes. When, right next to him, her dreams unchain her. Her hand that slips carries her away and her fingers trace the sunny paths of her travels.

Tell me again, my soul, the words lighter than a breath, we'll go if you want to get lost, follow me, I'll know where to take you.

Her eyes open, she watches the floor for the slow crawling of the day that begins and glides without a sound across the bars on the windows.

She rips from her body the rags spun from lies and copies, and dons translucent silk and frenzy. Invisible and lighter than a bubble, she flies away above cities populated with blind men and sleeping dogs. She is made of leaves and flowers in the green light that makes the chilly dawn tremble and comes undone in slender whirls until no more than an instant away from the extreme of pleasure.

Hate blows up in sprays of fire. Then it dies down, pearly white embers in the heart of silence.

With him, silence entered into her life.

When he is gone, the words never said, the repressed words, silenced, forgotten, spurt out in talkative leaps, turn around her in a frantic circle before breaking through the threshold of her closed lips.

She knows the force now, greater each day, even more, the violence of this silence that disheartens, exhausts, damages, corrodes, until she wants to switch her living flesh for mineral hardness, block of rot-proof granite, body irreversibly sealed.

Before, she only knew silence in murmured chants on clear mornings.

At another time in her life, there were voices, laughs of women on terraces saturated with light and in shadowy courtyards. Running, intermingled shouts and laughs of children drunk from sunlight in the golden streets of her childhood. Simple words thrown in bunches on those that one loves. And words to describe the vehemence of happiness and the banality of moments inserted in the banality of the days.

She needed a lot of time to learn, several years maybe. She can no longer count.

But she learned. She is nothing but a shadow now, devoured by hate and burned by silence.

She threw in the dark water of the wells memories of time passed until him, and the memory of the little girl with already sad eyes, as if misty from the distress of the days to come. Furiously, she rips her former dreams out of herself, inscribed on her body, the smiles inscribed on the blind facades, the fear learned since childhood, above all don't say anything, eyes lowered, submissive, she approves. She knows now how to tame the dreams, smooth out her face, mask, hardened steel, lies and copies. All that remains now is the sharp point of her desire.

The silence boils over, burning blades, penetrating the already burned flesh. This scream in her head, like an echo of the long bellowing of departing boat horns, and the swell of waves that submerge her every now and then.

Above all don't say anything, my daughter, said her mother. Wise and silent, she approves.

Silence today is her most reliable weapon, her mask, her shield.

She learned to keep quiet, to sleep at night, filled with silence.

Learned also to lower her eyes, in front of her father, her brothers who turn away when she approaches, out of fear of reading a trace of her nights on her face, of smelling on her the scent of a man.

The man is there, sleeping near her. He is there, crushing mass of blood and flesh, open hands. She, body tense with effort, doesn't move, closes itself off, dissolves, curls up into a block of hate, repulsive heat of this sleeping body, too close, scraps of night under his lowered eyelids, stop the too loud beating of his heart, more hate, thin skinned, uncontrollable quivering, wait for the day, flecks of light across the lowered blinds, free her from the shadows, escaping him.

Each morning, in clear water, she erases from her body, to tear it from her skin, the murky odor that contaminates it.

He came one day and you gave me to him.

One day, she says, I will leave.

The windows are high and the doors are closed. The sounds of the city so close, on the other side of the walls. The women who wear light dresses, on the other side of the walls. The men who walk, the sound of their heavy steps that hammer out the long hours, dogs panting, the faraway, tireless growl in the

arteries of the city, the slow palpitation of the conflated days, the night that falls with all its weight, timid hope, hope standing in the center of her being, yes, one day I will leave.

She waits now.

Her days are slow, unchanging. All day she listens to the sounds of the city, so close, and in the detours of her docile memory, endlessly recreates the world for her alone forbidden.

She did not forget, she did not forget anything about the streets of the city. She could, her eyes closed, wander the narrow alleys of the low and white city, dark mazes, stinking, sometimes so suitable for forbidden games. She finds in her memory of her hands, the familiar bumps of the old rocks, the unexpected coolness of the walls inside the long deserted corridors, behind the never closed doors of the houses in her neighborhood. At night, she recognizes the savage stubbornness of the wind coming from the sea that beats on the city with a furious grip. The smell, recognizable among all of them, gutted fish, rotted seaweed, petrified, the smell of the old port, lingering, foul odor of fuel oil exhaling on summer nights, so strong that you have to close the windows, despite the heat, and even in closing them, the smell, always there at the heart of one's life.

Now all the windows are closed, but sometimes the smell glides up to her, like a call, as if something better is still possible.

Sometimes, she goes out; he is there, he waits for her. In front of him, she covers her body with a heavy black cloth, opaque and not allowing any part of her face to be seen except for the sharp slit of her eyes. She hears murmurs on her way of those who are afraid of being like her one day. Their eyes full of pity or hate, in front of this phantom body, this mute and unsettling shadow of a shadow, a black stain on the bright streets bathing in the sweetness of living. She never goes out alone. He is there, a few steps away, he goes ahead of her and does not even need to turn around to know she is following him. She could slip away in the crowd, let herself be carried away by the floods, and get lost. She could run away, but she follows him, she waits, lucid and resolute, she waits.

Every day she gathers her strength in the force of the hate that grows within her, in her infertile belly. She cradles it, protects it with her two crossed arms, mouth closed, soft murmur, she hums it love songs.

Patience my soul, the day will soon arrange for us the map of our escape and it will be our turn to go out into the sun.

He never lays his eyes on her, never says her name. Every night he takes her. He has never seen her body. Her eyes open in the night, the weight of this

body on her, that rank and burning panting, the jolts that her heart gives out, the man that spreads within her, lucid and silent, she waits.

She watches his breath. Tangles of brambles in her head, her hands bristling from sharp blades, passed over the edge of her hate sharpened for so long, she leans on him, he sleeps, sated and still simmering mass, she leans on him, and suddenly the night smashes in a stopped scream.

Do not be afraid my soul, we will never again be afraid, day is coming now, the doors are open, see how the day stretches out in the dawn soon to be soaking in light.

The streets are deserted and the city is still asleep, still murky and dressed in silence. And the sea so close, that waits for her, for so long, and her dreams that roll out under her feet.

She fills herself up with this life that she is taking back, that she never gave him, he came one day and you gave me to him.

Alone on the path, she dances. The ground crumbles under her bare feet, follow me, my soul, we will be there soon.

She is finally free, and her desire spreads itself in the cool wind, running away to join the clouds, she is finally free, and under her famished skin is the violent caress of the sun, it penetrates her, ultimate offering, she gives herself.

The taste of salt in her mouth. Before she even reaches the shore. The echo of her running unravels the silence. The echo of her multiplied steps, the tumult of her heart, the sudden flight of frightened birds, and then, already perceptible, the pounding of steps right behind her.

She is running now. The beating of her temples, another heart in her head, the roar of her blood, ebb and flow inside her... where to draw the strength to run again, her legs are pieces of wood... the strength to run, the burning of air in her throat, miniscule fragments of fire under her eyelids, glowing embers of sand, peaks of fire under her feet, please, let me run, smile at the sea, with all my strength, soften it, so it opens itself, so it takes me, unfolded body, infinitely...

The Oracle

“My brothers, it pains me to tell you what was revealed to me. Here has come the time of hate and death! God makes it so that I will no longer be of this world as soon as the hour has sounded. Know, my brothers, that soon, an evil like no other will seize you. In not much time, men will come. They will come from even farther than the desert, crossing seas, dunes of sand, and stretches of the arid and somber earth. They will envelop you in their words and you will listen to them. They will call themselves your brothers and move among you. You will be without suspicion, you will open your door for them, and without a single drop of blood being spilled, they will seize your soul, before seizing your property, your dreams, and your sons. They will teach you to hate those who are most dear to you today and they will only leave behind ashes and dust where they will be. And so, this earth which you have shaped will no longer recognize its own people!”

Thus he spoke, the old man sitting in the sun. A growing crowd pressed around him. The men closest to him shook their heads in silence. Farther away, in the alleyways, the children had suspended their joyous and disordered running, and had suddenly become immobile in place, time seemed to be frozen. Little by little, a strange breeze spread in the heart of the crowd, penetrated the dark shops, slipped into the surrounding alleys, and crossed through the rock walls before falling in the heart of the old houses, flattened by the sun.

The old man was now quiet. The shadow of the white turban wrapped around his head partially concealed his features and a swarm of flies swirled around him. He seemed not to see them, not to hear their humming, almost deafening in the extended silence. No one knew who he was, nor where he came from, but he did not seem like a stranger in the city and the gravelly accents of his voice resonated in each of them, almost familiar. Was this why every passerby one by one had stopped to listen to his words?

And then, one of the men standing in the first row spoke: “Cursed be the oracles who see nothing but misfortune and desolation! That they’ll come to me, those who will make me lose my soul and rob me of my property! Are we going to remain here for even longer listening to the ramblings of a crazy old man come to sow trouble and fear in our lives? Do we not have anything better to do? Should we be easy prey for all the charlatans and imposters of all kinds? Let’s go, my brothers, disperse, everyone go see to their business, all of this is nothing but extravagance and craziness!”

The man who was speaking was none other than the old Si Mokhtar, the imam of the grand mosque, and with this title, one of the most respected men in the city, and also one of the richest. No sooner had everyone recognized his voice, than a wave began to grow in the audience, as if his words had finally broken a charm. Here and there heads turned and murmurs traveled across the crowd as

quickly as they could get around. With a sudden movement, Si Mokhtar extracted himself from the bodies pressed against him and prepared to leave the place.

Then the old, motionless man stood up slowly and pointed a finger at the man who spoke. A profound sadness seemed to choke his voice when he said: “Misfortune on those who do not know! Misfortune on he who does not see farther than the day that rises upon him! Oh you who listen to my words, forget the want and the hate that give rise to quarrels and protect yourselves from yourselves first! That alone will be able to save you! May those who want to go now to build ramparts or fortify their homes, it will all crumble like sand, I tell you!”

While he was speaking, the sky above the city suddenly became overcast with a cloud so low that it seemed to want to spread out on the ground. A sudden darkness fell on the square and whirlwinds of dirt rose up, causing the audience to close their eyes and cover their faces to protect themselves. The crowd broke up and thus the men, afflicted and pensive, turned around one by one and returned to their homes, where their wives, cloistered away since time immemorial, had heard nothing other than the rumor of the outstanding storm over the city.

The old man stayed sitting in the middle of the square for a while, without making a movement to shoo away the flies that were now swarming about him in a sort of noisy and amazingly regular dance. Then, he got up and folded the

sections of his white linen burnoose on his chest. He took a glance at the square now dark and deserted, and in leaning on his knotted cane slowly began to walk in the direction of the road that lead to the neighboring city.

The first night was long and filled with strange and disturbing dreams. The storm dissipated as it had come, without a sound, leaving only a few drops of rain behind it, so discrete that no one heard them.

In the morning, with faces hollowed out by long hours of waiting for sleep and trying to chase away the anxiety that had wormed itself into their hearts, the people found themselves in the square, still under the influence of confused feelings, the exact nature of which no one had been able to discern. And surprisingly, all the inhabitants of the city, even those who ignored all of the terrible prophecy, felt prey to the same torment. That morning, no one spoke about the ranting of the old man, but every one of his words still resonated on the square with such force that the air seemed filled with incessant murmuring.

A few days went by without anything changing on the surface in the behavior of the men and women of the city. They traded, they went about their daily work, and they found themselves in the square, at the same times, for the same hollow debates before returning home, carefully avoiding any hint of this faint threat that everyone, in his own defensive body, felt hovering over his or her life and those of the others.

Yet, with a new intensity, they all tried to decode the signs. An omen that this sky, an unchanging, cloudless blue that the farmers of the neighboring regions desperately scrutinized? And these clouds of dust that fell regularly on the city, as if lifted up by the gallop of a multitude of invisible cavaliers without a single sign of wind! And what meaning to give these dreams that they tried to forget, to bury deep within themselves until the day when they realized in a stupor, while listening to the spice merchant in the square, that they were all haunted by the same visions of horror, terrifying visions of torn, decapitated bodies, raped women and mutilated children.

The confusion was so great, it was barely noticeable that the city was populated each night at the fall of darkness by small groups of men who faithfully joined each other at the hour of prayer. They came back each day, so discrete, so respectful that you ended up getting used to their presence. They spoke the same language and nothing, neither in their clothing nor in their words, distinguished them from the inhabitants of the city. Irreproachable men, for the most part well-off traders, showing a very great religious culture and who with this title would succeed in rapidly slipping into the business of the city and then establishing themselves there without anyone thinking for a single instant to worry about them. Very much on the contrary, their wisdom and their ostensible moderation cut the ambient disarray so well that one even developed the habit of consulting them and soon their estimations and their judgements took the force of law. They

did so well that they became mixed up with the inhabitants and many of them allied with the greatest families of the city in marrying their daughters.

And during this time, each night, at the fall of darkness, the sky sent lugubrious echoes of the cries of vultures swirling above the city, waiting, and the squeals of jackals close by.

Little by little, fear settled in, weighing with all its violence on every word pronounced, on every gesture observed, and with it, distrust and suspicion. Very quickly, it was necessary to find ways of exorcising it, fighting against it. The invocations to God intensified, the men became more numerous in the mosques, and they established in haste numerous places of worship that were too cramped to contain the crowd of the new believers that would not stop growing. They had to pray in the neighboring streets, straining their ears to hear the sermons, more and more convincing every day, more and more threatening. Yes, it was because all the men of the city had turned their backs on the divine word that a just punishment had been reserved for them! The words of the old man were interpreted, commented on, exaggerated with a multitude of details so extravagant that they seemed believable. They held heated debates on the hidden meaning of each word of the oracle, and sometimes they ended in bloody altercations between those who believed in the prophecy and those who did not. All peace had fled and the voices of the men who had not been touched by this collective hysteria were naturally stifled.

Evil was there, in the city. There was no doubt about it. You simply had to discover where it was hiding. This was an easy thing to do in a city with such rigorous values. You just had to look for it there where it always had been. It was like this that a few women at first, rightly or wrongly accused of selling their bodies, were singled out by popular demand. It was not long before pyres were lit, on which expiatory victims were immolated. They also discovered, on the fringes of the forest, not far from the city, several women's bodies, naked and atrociously mutilated, but still recognized as those who had dared to expose themselves in supporting secular laws, deserving this punishment. Nevertheless, that was not enough to snuff out the hate that now impassioned everyone's hearts.

Clerics reexamined the words of the oracle. They recalled that it was clearly stated that evil would come from strangers, or from those who did not speak the same language and did not worship the same God. They found some: nonbelievers were hunted down, executed in the middle of the square, with the cheering of the crowd, in the same place where the old man had pronounced his fateful words. But that was not enough to bring serenity to the city. It was thus decided to eliminate all who did not conform to the new laws established by the new masters of the city, both elected officials and judges. They established lists that were posted on the doors of the mosques and they entrusted this sacred mission to young people toughened up and duly trained not to tremble in front of

the most atrocious sights, because they must eradicate evil, whatever the price may be.

This was the era of the exodus, the denunciation, and for a large number of people, the era of revenge. The city emptied. Abandoning all their belongings, entire families fled the scene and took refuge in neighboring cities where, penned up in hastily set up camps, they tried to survive somehow. Neighbors, friends, fathers and sons were denounced with the ineffable feeling of saving one's soul in this way, and participating in a purification by fire and by blood.

At the same time, in the neighboring regions, people marveled at how the words of one visionary had produced an effect much more devastating than a strongly equipped and determined army. The most eminent specialists on the question thought through this truly incredible phenomenon and decided to follow with care the evolution of the situation before proposing an opinion. Some of them, with worry, noticed that this phenomenon was at risk of growing if they were not careful. No one took their alarming predictions into account, even called ridiculous by some, and they continued to observe from afar the unprecedented field of experiences that this once peaceful city had become.

Each morning brought men to the square. But there were soon fewer and fewer of them. Not a single storyteller came to tell his stories, they had all disappeared. Not a single song came to please their hearts and illuminate the day.

They had silenced the voices of the most valiant poets and only the monotonous funeral chants broke the silence of the nights. The men distressed by all the misfortune that had fallen on the city no longer dared to speak and quickly returned to their homes, with heavy steps and tormented souls.

The men returned to their homes where their wives were waiting for them, their mothers, their sisters and their daughters held even more tightly shut away since the beginning of this terrible era. Anxious and powerless, these women flocked to any news, letting out long howls and tearing at their faces whenever the door opened on a cortege of silent men carrying the lifeless body of their spouse, one of their sons or their brothers, or even their father. A number of them lost their minds like this, and one soon began seeing strange creatures, disheveled and scruffy, wandering the streets of the city in desperate search of the phantoms that were haunting them. In the cemeteries that now stretched beyond the old walls of the city, the black and white veils of tearful visitors flapped in the wind, visitors who had come to find some comfort in the compassion and tears of other widows, other mothers, other orphans.

Some of them had to quickly dry their tears. Despite the suffering, they had to continue on living. Or rather learn how to live without the support and the presence (believed to be indispensable and irreplaceable until now) of men. It's just that there were no longer enough males to take charge of the distress of the lonely women and fatherless children. Many had gone into exile to escape the

hunt and could not send the necessary subsidies from so far away. Entire families found themselves impoverished of all support and they had to think up ways to come to their aid. The notables consulted each other and, in accordance with religious prescriptions, widows were obligated to take another husband, often as the second, even the third wife. A solution that provoked widespread reactions, to the greatest satisfaction of the most vehement revolt.

And so it was that this produced an event like no one had ever seen before, in the memory of man. They never knew who the instigators were. At the hour when all the men of the city came to the mosque for the nighttime prayer, women of all ages left their homes alone, a number of them for the first time in their lives, and in long, spirited, colorful processions they headed for the city square to express their anger, their refusal to submit to this unjust, humiliating obligation. Intoxicated by their audacity, they seized the opportunity to also express their desire to put an end to the tears, the despair and the fear. And their cries, contained for too long, made the walls of the city tremble, finally awakened.

At first stupefied, the men moved aside to let the swell descend upon the square, still submerged in light. The children, delighted with this disruption, came to shatter the sadness that had gnawed away at their days for so long, joined their mothers and let their exuberance run free. There were wives wounded by the loss of their husbands, their only shield from the intolerance of a society clogged with ancient traditions; mothers affected at the deepest level of their flesh by the recent

disappearance of one or several of their sons, unacceptable disappearance because it was incomprehensible; and other women, simply in solidarity, standing up against the savagery, the injustice and the tragic credulity of the strong sex, and had, bringing their veils over their faces for fear of being recognized by their husbands, doing their best to hide from their better halves in the middle of the noisy crowd, all those who no longer accepted silence and who, at the risk of losing everything, had come to grow the ranks of this incredibly mutiny.

Very quickly, insults and jeers burst out. And threats, too. Young people shouted at these brazen women with crude words meant to reach all the way into their hearts. A word of order ran immediately through the ranks of the procession: continue to walk, ignore the provocations, and most importantly do not let yourself be intimidated. Little by little, the march of the women in the city was organized and a few among them unexpectedly found themselves being seen as the leaders. On their way, the doors of the houses opened and young girls came out, lively and radiant, encouraged by the applause of the crowd. And when they arrived at the square, they were so numerous that the traveling salesmen had to hurriedly close up their stalls and take refuge inside the boutiques whose curtains were lowered just as quickly.

At the gesture of the first woman to arrive on the square, silence fell. Attentive, the swallows lined up on the roofs stopped their chirping while a soft

breeze blew, just strong enough to chase away the few clouds in the sky and bring a little bit of coolness at the end of this suffocating summer day.

Facing the now motionless and completely silent women, the men assembled in front of the door of the great mosque consulted with one another in low voices to agree on what measures to take; they had to stop this revolt before it took a serious turn. It was their duty to calm these women who were visibly determined to invade a space that was not made for them, and to bring them to their senses in inviting them firmly but without violence to return home. Which one among them would be able and wise enough to find the words that would convince them? No one truly felt the courage to confront such a large number of women all at once, and the muttering continued, raising the tension that dominated their ranks.

And so they remembered the old Si Mokhtar, the imam of the mosque, the man who they no longer listened to since the beginning of the new era because he alone had dared to defy the oracle. He had been very quickly replaced, according to general demand, by other preachers, younger, more spirited, who knew how to find the words capable of arousing the fervor of the faithful and to bring tears to the most skeptical. They searched for him, and he did not take long to appear in the square, still accompanied by the women who respectfully greeted him. Yet it was toward the men that he turned, and to them he addressed these words: “My brothers, know that it took me a long time to understand the words of the saintly

man who, in my fit of anger, I had the audacity to treat like a fool! I hope that he will forgive me if he can hear me wherever he is! I know now that it is time for us to fulfill the prophecy. Does anyone still remember the recommendations of the wise old man? Did he not ask you to forget your quarrels and the hate that pits you against each other? Without knowing where it came from, you let evil penetrate you and only you can extract it. To do that you must search for other ways than those inspired by the men who say they are your brothers. It is at that price alone that you will be able to find serenity again, the happiness of living and that peace that you destroyed with your own hands!” With these words, he turned around as he had come, leaving behind him the perplexed and silent men.

The women had followed with care the words of the old imam. Several of them, judging without a doubt that the men needed to be left time to react, started to detach from the crowd to quickly return home. But the swell did not subside. All the others tightened up their ranks, and determined not to cede a single inch of territory that they came to take, settled in more comfortably, spreading their veils on the ground so that they could sit down. And it was with bare heads that they faced the outraged eyes of their fellow citizens.

Anxiety and anger increased among the men. Were they going to let this insolence go on longer? Who knows how far these women could go in their audacity? Reproaching themselves for their mutual weakness, men all around the

square began to insult each other and chaos set in. In the last rays of daylight, they saw shadows suddenly moving about and gathering brutally.

From the middle of the square a song rose up, a soft and fragile voice, hesitant at first, then more and more confident, as if it were launching itself into the night. And they soon recognized a tune forgotten for years, a distant and familiar tune, so tender, so harrowing that the chaos stopped on its own and everyone began to feel a strange palpitation awaken deep within them, coming from the deepest part of their memory. Other voices joined the first and the choir of women opened up to the sky up above and reverberated from star to star.

The women sang for a long time and the men around them, rediscovering their souls, forgot themselves as they listened. And the night, gorgeous and sweet, closed in around them.

In the morning, an old man sitting in the middle of the square, deserted and flooded with sunlight, stood up slowly, and leaning on his knotted cane, began to walk toward the west and disappeared little by little in the sparkling light of the dusty road.

Endnotes

¹ The Organisation Armée Secrète (OAS), or the Organization of the Secret Army, was a paramilitary organization formed during the Algerian War (1954-1962) whose goal was to prevent Algeria's independence from French colonial rule. The OAS was in direct conflict with the FLN (Algerian National Liberation Front) and carried out terrorist attacks against the FLN and its supporters.

² Kahloucha is a somewhat pejorative term from the Arabic word for black used to describe a black woman in Algeria.

³ The original French word that I have translated as "crack" in English is "lézarde." This word is very similar in spelling and sound both to the French word "lézard," and its English translation, "lizard." The rest of the paragraph, while technically about a crack in a wall, has reptilian connotations: "I cling to the dry walls," "Burrow in the rocky ground," etc. The closest I was able to come to preserving both the literal meaning and the figurative connotations of this paragraph was in translating the French word "écailles" as "scales" in English, instead of "chips" or "flakes," which I also could have chosen. Whereas "chips" or "flakes" would make more sense in this context, "scales" preserves some of the meaning that is lost when "lézarde" is translated as "crack."

⁴ The French word for "spears" is "épieux," and the word for "pious" "pieux." "Épieux" and "pieux" have practically the same spelling and sound, which is why

Bey follows those words with “The same word.” “Épieux” has limited translations and unfortunately I could not find a word that is spelled like or sounds similar to “pious.”

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