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The electronic barrier ran along the roadway where Cham, a private, watched the bus for Tel Aviv pull away. A few minutes before he had deposited his gun and kit at the command post and had come out smiling with a permit for a furlong in his pocket. His three weeks of freedom had begun with a lost day. So, instead of going up to report in, Cham, feeling a little at sea, dragged his feet down to the corner observation post where Tzvi, the Adjutant, was waiting in a concrete bunker for his relief.

“This is convenient,” the Adjutant said. “We can do the rounds together.”

“But I’m on leave. I don’t have my gun.”

“Don’t worry, everything we need is here.”

“It’s against the rules to eat into my time off like this.”

“And do you think it’s by the book to leave me on patrol by myself?”

Private Cham and the Adjutant patrolled along the outside of the security fence, Galil automatic rifles slung over their shoulders. Tzvi was smoking a Turkish cigarette. The dusk shed its rays across the pallid blue of the hills. To the west, the silhouette of a woman, balanced on a donkey, danced along the twisted and fading line of the horizon.
Cham squinted to look across the peaks. Beyond the security perimeter, below the plateau, flocks of sheep and goats moved over the hills. The colour of sand, they changed the countryside, a little like clouds casting shadows. A loop in the electronic barrier was under construction. It separated the Arab villages spreading out to the west from the colony of Ber Schov already firmly ensconced on its fortifications. The lights of Hebron were visible to the north and, just barely, a constellation in a corner of the falling sky. Towards the end of the horizon, beyond a swath of darkness, sat the Dead Sea. The evening haze, a shroud, mauve lace over the mountains of Moab.

“Everything’s good,” said the Adjutant. “We’ll go back, and down some cool ones.”

With that he turned on his heels and staggered, his face contorted in terror. The instant of shock hardly left him enough time to raise his gun. A bullet went through his forehead before he had time to shoot. His big body sagged like a cracking tree. As he sank, blood began to trickle down his head. In the eyes of the Private, the Adjutant had still not hit the ground. Cham was familiar with this kind of false time: a nameless stupor caught hold of each second. Paralysed by the effect of timelessness, he was able to capture each facet of the moment. A commando had managed to make his way across the dirt path right up to the “wall.” Two or three men spotted him in the dusk. He instinctively pointed his gun at one of them. Tracers lit up dark blue outlines of the night in silhouettes. The shot came out as a muffled blast and resonated far away in the hills. Several more detonations echoed in response.

Tzvi, on his stomach, fingers outstretched, was now spread out at Cham’s feet. Dirt from the explosion was now spreading down. But Cham no longer had the luxury of contemplating the subtleties of the moment. A bullet hit his left shoulder, another grazed his temple. It was not painful. A sensation of mute shock and of letting go. One of the assailants groaned. The violence was consummated in a strange sort of pleasantness. Everything fell into a loop of time that no appeal to reason could resolve.

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Crouched on the mat, Cham notices that the flames and the swirls are subject to similar disturbances. A disheartening odour of blood is pervasive throughout the cave. The two men carry on a dialogue punctuated by silences and sighs. Their injured companion, who is lying on the straw mat, keeps creeping into their conversation. And even though he is himself cast down beside the man, his left arm in a sling, no one seems to take any notice of him. Over time, he catches the names of the fighters: Tarek, the eldest, and Cha’bân, the guy with the MP5. Somewhat bigger and with a buzz cut, he has a closely cropped beard and round glasses. A scar runs from his neck to his left ear. He watches the greying fifty-something man intensely, as if searching for evidence of some connivance. Always on guard, a nervous hand caresses the handle of a revolver stuck in his belt. Shouts come down from the trap door. Cham thinks he recognizes a fourth assailant wearing a keffiyeh and a gandoura. By what stroke of luck were they able to get away through the alarm systems and the control towers? A breakdown, a propitious moment of confusion must have offered itself in the abrupt change of day into night.

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There were at least three of them up above. Was it already dawn? The pain came and went—it was the only thing he really felt. One evident truth: they would make use him or they would kill him. Tarek lit another cigarette with the butt of the last which he then threw into the neck of a more or less empty beer bottle. The kidnappers did not belong to Hamas, nor to Islamic Jihad. Perhaps a commando unit of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, or the Fatah Falcons. But the latter operated almost exclusively in the Gaza Strip. Or perhaps an armed dissident faction, a kind of revolutionary group, dozens of which could be found in the West Bank. But, in the end, what difference could it make to him? He put aside all propensity to combative-ness, to resentment, or to speculating one way or the other. The cadaver beside him began to stiffen, open mouthed. Had he turned his face to Mecca? The distress of the survivors explained their neglect of him.

Cham wondered who it might have been who cleaned his wounds and bandaged his shoulder in the night: the uppity one with the MP5? Or the old distraught man? His chest all of sudden felt hollowed out with the hard thought of death. A chaotic sequence of images of summary execution went through his head. Of course, he wanted to make a run for it, but a sudden onset of panic set him straight before he could get to his knees. He could see that there was a cord around his ankles which rendered him a paralytic. Could they have drugged him? He wanted to call out. A state of shock sometimes had a narcotic effect. His cigarette, having burnt right up to the filter, rolled onto the ground. He picked out an ember close to the wooden case. His eyes squinted a bit. He held his breath without trying to. His head leaned against the shoulder of the cadaver. Sleep soon engulfed him in the cold odour of death.
“It’s amusing,” he said. “You Muslims and us Jews, all we manage to agree on are a few myths. Yet look at this. The only place in the world where you can find a synagogue and a mosque under the same roof. But do you really believe that Adam and Eve, Abraham and the others are buried here?”

The call of the muezzin sounded as he spoke. The jeep rounded the gardens and began to climb into the old town. Only a few mules loaded with baskets, bicycles and scooters were on the streets. The silence of the young woman, so close behind him, moved him like a kind of complicity or secret harmony. He watched her in the rear-view mirror, troubled by the youthful seriousness of her traits.

“Did Adam and Eve love each other?” the Major asked. “Have you ever thought about it? Apart from the Song of Songs, love is never discussed in the Bible. It’s the same in the Koran…”

As he was not getting a response out of his passenger, he nervously pressed on the accelerator and began to stammer.

“I could love you so much, Falastìn. I would be there for you, yes, the dearest, the most devoted companion…”

“Love, love?” she stammered, shaken from a unsavoury dream. “To love, is that not to die?”

Manastir was shuffling around cleaning up his studio. He had just turned off the spotlights that lit up his old cardboard mural. It displayed a naive view of the pyramids of Egypt, a composite scene of the walls of Jerusalem with the citadel and the Dome of the Rock mosque, a ship in the harbour of Beirut and some palaces from A Thousand and One Nights. He had pulled out a portrait of a family of non-nomadic Bedouins who had settled in the neighbourhood and kept a small shop of prayer mats, keffiyehs and camel hair blankets. The picture would be sent to cheer up, or amuse, a prodigal son who had left two years earlier to seek his fortune in America. Manastir had also identified on a contact sheet an entire class of children that a teacher, and archaeology buff, hoped to take on a tour of the east coast of the Dead Sea. In the darkness of the shop, Manastir went from one shelf to another, dusting frames, arranging postcards, undecided as to whether he should put down his shutters despite the late hour. Since the arrest of Mohammed the day before, unceremoniously apprehended in the high street while returning from the bazaar, he knew that his business was under threat. Even if the refugee from al-Arkop yielded nothing to the
Omar had winked while saying these words. A shade of bitterness on his lips. In the end, Nessim decided to stuff the torn envelope into his jacket.

“Get in the van,” said Manastir snuffing out the lamp. “Sleep well until tomorrow and then split. It’s not safe here.”

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They obeyed in silence once their host had gone. Side by side at the rear of the vehicle, they sank into the night, for a long time listening to the insignificant workings of things—the squeaking of axles or of floorboards, the scurrying of mice in the gutters, the hissing of pipes.

“Are you asleep, Nessim?” Omar asked in the voice of one on the lookout.

“No, I was listening to the rain.”

“You’re dreaming then. It’s not raining. What will you do?”

“Find her.”

“Falastin? They are watching her. Come with me instead. I have a safe place at the edge of the souk, by Bab al-Zawiya, while I wait to go to Bethlehem.”

“I’d rather find her,” Nessim said with a sigh.

“Do as you like, but if you change your mind, ask for me at Mossa Abu Khiran’s, the blacksmith, behind the little mosque.”

Nessim had laid his head on a piece of cloth pulled from the envelope. It was now completely dark inside the cab. He told himself that he would fall asleep, that the absurdity of this night would soon be absorbed by the darkness. Omar’s voice rekindled fragments of reality. A alternate world kept alive through his words ...

“Allah’s sun casts no shadow, you hear me? We will break the oppression through strength of will. So it is written. Anyway, I’ll explain it all to you: the Holocaust is a hoax perpetrated by Western traitors to grab our land. I learnt about this at the Koranic school. Even Arafat was a servant of the Jewish lobby. Are there not two blue stripes on their flag, huh? These dogs want to extend their reach from the Nile to the Euphrates. But we will hurl them all into the sea ...”

“Into the sea?”

Nessim, astonished, tried to visualize such a phenomenon.

Distant rumblings on the wind and the silent gushing of blood through the ventricles of his heart took on the full amplitude of the ocean: he saw the waters of the sea receding under a rose amber sky against which large gulls glided.

“The idea is to blow them up in a bus or in a market,” Omar said. “I know where to get a suicide vest. You should not regret this oppressed life. The more Zionists you kill, the quicker you will get to heaven. It’s like an ignition fluid. The martyr purifies himself in the blood of his enemies ...”

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Nessim is no longer listening. Pearly waves encircle him. Aboard a boat or a dream, he lets his hands slip into the
living water. Kites lend colour to a sky all too white. It is no longer Omar who speaks but Falastin. Her loose hair blowing in the wind and the boat lost on the ocean, carried by the driving sail.

“Far, far away from all this madness,” the girl whispers. Between two black wings, her face is an open book from which words flow.

“Far from the ruins of Susiah,” she says. “Far from Jerusalem.”

Falastin’s abundant hair spreads like ink around her body. Suddenly, the sea merges with the night under a dome of stars. Is sleep so akin to forgetting? Diffuse figures mingle and fade away. An entire lifetime through the flash of a dream. But what life? The sun rises.

Someone whispers in his ear: “Ask at Mossa Abu Khiran’s, the blacksmith, behind the little mosque ...”

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Still sleepy, exhausted from internal struggles, he did not notice Omar’s departure. He blinked a moment, seeing the fabric of the keffiyeh. He wanted to get up, but a yoke held him down. Memory was cutting through the darkness and illusions. Overly fluid words, with the taste of blood, moistened his lips:

You recall the eyelids of my soul  
And the discord that renders me mute.  
I thought about the old times,  
Of entire centuries, remembered.

In the darkness of the heart, a song rises.  
Is it the spirit within me that asks,  
Is this the dried up spring that the wind disperses  
At the pleasure of the desert and forever and ever?

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Now the rain really was ringing on the tin roof. He also briefly heard the rolling up of metal shutters that someone was hoisting; on the other side of the wall, the photographer was opening his shop. He had to get up as quickly as possible and, in his turn, leave—as Omar had done at daybreak. Fleeing he knew not what improbable threat. But where would he go with no real desire to go anywhere? Nothing resembled anything he knew; everywhere puppets were trading places while offering up enigmatic curses. Among all the unrecognizable masks, one face alone held a smile, only it shone out from the refuge of hidden places, out from the dreariness of the Arab ghettos, from behind the walls and the barriers.

The muezzins of Hebron began to sing again, more abundant even than the song of starlings consorting. Their voices soon dissolved, mixing with the wind and rain: la ilaha illa lah. Were the last words of the call anything more than a tinkling on the roof?

Then the screeching of brakes and slamming of doors displaced the age-old comforting refrain. There was a disturbance near the shops. A quick succession of explosions. Nessim gathered some clothes, stuffed them in his backpack and jumped out of the van. He left the scene without
Even the antique camera on its tripod was now in pieces amid the debris of the painted mural. The remnants of a death scene would hardly have been more shocking. He backed away in turn, a cramp in his side. Tears clouded his eyes; yet he could not comprehend why he was so sad. Something was missing in the world, a colour, a critical connection. His mind emptied, he felt as if his chest was hollow. He walked at random, like a person eviscerated, listening to funeral music streaming in from every direction. Snippets of Arab songs twisted around a continuous beat. The street vendors shifted between shady façades without changing their tunes. Plentiful and ubiquitous, the sharp voices of children with the exact intonation of shrill swallows against a summer sky. Peasants, having arrived in Hebron the night before, shouted, selling their vegetables in the streets. A few private cars and yellow taxis blocked the corners of the street. The H1 sector crowd—veiled women in jeans or djellabas, disaffected youth, workers in overalls, beggars in their droopy rags—all moved in slow waves around the palm trees and kiosks. Pale, his belly in knots, Nessim considered the oddity of cloth on bodies, on faces. From swaddling clothes to funeral shrouds, there was something of the larva about human life, given that no one was born in such linens. It was as if air threatened the skin with oxidation and venom. He searched desperately through the faces for a sign of recognition: a look of familiarity perhaps. He wandered among countless brothers and mothers, children sheathed in lineage, intimate strangers with infinite eyes.
serious hardware, straight from Syria. Once you pass out my door, you’ll forget me, whatever happens. And beware, you will be easily typed as an Arab. Avoid patrols, some carry electronic sensors for polymer. In any case, activate the detonator at the earliest possible time and do a good job of killing. I have no enemy, brother. I will go to a hideout before the explosion. Al hamdoulillah. Peace be with you. Before God, don’t worry about me.”

Standing in a bus chosen at random, on Jericho Avenue, between Jeremiah’s grotto and the Rockefeller Museum, after a terrified walk along the walls, he tries to catch his breath among all the tourists and a group of school children returning from an excursion. The overwhelming illusion of being alive is not worth the pain. Condensation on the windows hides the empty sky.

The mechanism is now operational; all that is left is to activate it. There is a wire passing through the lining of his jacket. He holds, in the palm of his hand, a tiny box with a kind of switch. He can turn out all the lights. To disappear is an opportunity to achieve oblivion. He observes the passengers crowded around him, their relative prosperity, the wide smiles of the women, the self-concerned air of the men immersed in their newspapers. The overcrowdedness solicits a sleepy malaise. In the soft swinging of the bus’ suspension, heads wobble a little, as if giving in to the inoffensiveness of the hour. A few words are exchanged on the run of good weather. A priest in a cassock photographs the Damascus gate as the bus goes by. Two students mock a professor.

“Sometimes he thinks he’s Einstein,” one says.
About The Author

Born in Tunis in 1947, poet, playwright, short story writer and novelist Hubert Haddad has never forgotten his Jewish and Berber origins. He was raised in Paris and published his first book of poems, *Le Charnier déductif*, at the age of twenty and his first novel, *Un rêve de glace*, in 1974. His earlier work explored fantasy and magical realism in a fresh, hallucinatory light, while his later writings have focused on memory and a critical approach to history. In more than fifty novels, plays, and essays, he has explored the behaviour of human beings in extremis. The original French version of *Palestine* won the Prix des Cinq Continents de la Francophonie in 2008, and the Prix Renaudot Poche in 2009. It has sold more than 60,000 copies.
Pierre L’Abbé published his first book, Lyon, in 1996. A long narrative poem, Lyon weaves through the city’s culture, geography and Roman history. He is also the author of Ten Days in Rio, a novella in verse (WatershedBooks), and Kiss of the Beggar (Guernica, stories), and is the translator of Benjamin Fondane’s Exodus (Joseph Norman). Pierre now lives in Toronto.

Biblical quotations from the Douay-Rheims Bible with adaptations by the translator.