

Ahmed is gazing at the clouds in the sky, floating clouds, magical clouds.

Ahmed likes poetry, although he only knows a few scraps, words that come back to him fleetingly like bubbles rising to the surface of one's soul. Often these lines turn up on their own, without author or title. This time they remind him of Baudelaire, a tale of faraway lands, of freedom, some English thing. Baudelaire was his favourite writer back then, along with Van Gogh and Artaud. Later on there was Debord. And then he'd given up reading. Well, almost. Nowadays he buys *Le Parisien*, on those mornings when he comes down. Along with vast numbers of identikit Anglo-American thrillers: Connely, Cornwell, Cobain. The feeling he's forever reading the same novel is so strong that, with very few exceptions, he mixes all their names up in his head. But that is just what he seeks. Losing himself, absorbing the whole universe inside an unbroken narrative written by someone else.

He stocks up at the second-hand bookstore on Rue Petit. A tiny little shop from days gone by that, remarkably, has managed to survive in between the Lubavitch school complex, the Salafist prayer hall and the evangelical church. Perhaps because M. Paul, an old Armenian anarchist, fits into none of the categories of oddball who now share the area among themselves. And he sells his secular literature by weight, making him more of a grocer than a dealer in Shaitanic works. From time to time, the bookseller adds another text to the pile without saying a word. An Ellroy, a Tosches, a newly-published Manchette. Ahmed gives him a barely perceptible wink. Grateful to his supplier for preventing his total degeneration. He remembers *those* authors.

He hasn't been out today. He still has a frozen baguette, a packet of ham tortellini, a salmon and spinach quiche, enough butter for three slices of bread, the remains of some strawberry jam made by

his upstairs neighbour Laura (he'd have lusted after her, had he still known how to lust), a multipack of Évian, a bar of Ivoria dark chocolate with hazelnuts, five sixty-six centilitre bottles of Tsingtao, half a seventy-five centilitre bottle of William Lawson, three bottles of wine – red, rosé, Monbazillac – and six cans of Almaza non-alcoholic beer, abandoned in cowardly fashion by his cousin Mohamed before leaving for Bordeaux six months ago. Not to mention a packet of Tuc, half a dried *saucisse*, two-thirds of a Valençay cheese, seven crackers, half a litre of skimmed milk and the remains of some Leader Price muesli. Plus, of course, those tins of gunpowder green tea and Malongo *percolatore*. Enough to keep him going until he's got through the three point seven kilos of books bought from M. Paul the day before.

For the time being, Ahmed is dreaming. He stares at the wonderful tea-time clouds and he dreams. His mind is leaving the district where he ceased to live five years ago. The detachment he longed for then is getting closer. Cloud-watching, reading,

sleeping and drinking when evening falls. Bit by bit, he has managed to give up television, and screens in general. Books are colonising his brain, he's aware of that, but he still can't do without them. Too soon for Ahmed to confront his demons alone. Other people's horrors, and their sick imaginations, allow him to restrain the monsters lurking deep within his skull.

Slowly, his mind takes flight, heading for the far-off encampments of his ancestors. His impossible origins. His outbound journey is as straight as an arrow, without mishap. From a height of ten kilometres he barely glances at the fields, mountains, water, pebbles, finally there's sand. A hundred dunes or so from the edge of the desert, he begins to descend towards the great blue erg. Suddenly they appear: camel-hair tents, men, animals, slaves. That biblical race, desirable and horrifyingly cruel. That insane world which is himself and his opposite. That aporia. Ahmed maintains a cautious distance and, as on every trip, makes do with flying over his distant cousins'

campsite at a sensible height. He is content to drift, incognito, among those guard-dogs of the desert, the mighty-winged vultures who always acknowledge him as one of their own.

The man-vulture circles in the cloudless sky and observes what has changed since his last visit. The atmosphere is different, more dense. In this hazy zone peopled by rebels, where national borders meet and men are to be found, there are four-by-fours kitted out for battle, fatigues, Kalashnikovs. Nothing new there. But what *is* different is the length of some men's beards; a sermon following communal prayers facing east; and expressions that betray, in a disturbing sequence, fever, certainty, anxiety, elation and unfathomable suffering. The tragic irony of desert warriors has given way to existential angst, as thick as tar, which unites them in a sense of self-loathing – dark or radiant, depending on their character. It has replaced the air they once breathed. Ahmed is already inhaling this

odourless, noxious gas, and starting to feel its effects. Yet he refuses to give in, to say farewell to his secret garden, his own patch of dunes, his internal purity. He lingers, he loiters, he dawdles. And then, behind a tent, the ultimate vision, a caricature of what he is refusing to contemplate. A strange black shape is crouching there. It has neither beginning nor end. A kind of ghost. Something human, something female, turning her head skywards, her gaze concealed by the blackness of a veil. The shroud-woman bores her invisible eyes into his, blasting him with pure horror and abject despair. The man-vulture wobbles. He is overcome by inertia and plummets towards the ground at top speed, unable even to express his desire not to fall. His winged companions are watching. They know that those veiled eyes have shattered the traveller's fragile immunity. Summoned to their duties once more as gatekeepers of the frontier between worlds, the celestial scavengers throng around him, forcing him to soar upwards again.

HIGHER! HIGHER! HIGHER!
FURTHER! FURTHER! FURTHER!
DON'T LOOK BACK!

Swiftly escorted back to the fringes of their aerial domain by his ex-comrades, Ahmed knows that from now on he is banished. He is free to explore Siberia or Patagonia. He is no longer welcome here.

Laghouat, Aïn-Ben-Tili, Meroë, Tiris, Tassili. Goulimine, Cyrenaica, Sicily, Ibiza, Olbia, Bonifacio, Valetta. It's always the long way round, getting home. This time more than ever. Ahmed needs to take it all in, to string out the return from that demented world, back here, to himself. Directly above Valetta, a minor setback results in a brutal injection of reality. The sort you might find in a poem in the style of Desnos: *Vertically over Valetta, a tempted Templar took a tumble*. Forget that, move on... In any case, he wouldn't mention it in his statement. Besides, there wouldn't be any statement. And who would understand it anyway?

So it is at Valetta, seven-five-zero-one-nine Paris, that he senses the first drop on his face, his half-closed eyes turned towards the sky. The second splodges onto the pristine sleeve of the *gallabiyah* he was given by cousin Mohamed. Ahmed looks down and watches the scarlet stain as it expands on the white cotton fabric. This is not rain. A third teardrop hits the end of his nose. He tastes it: blood. Then his eyes lift again, as if they knew what they would see. A motionless foot is hanging two metres above him, forming a bizarrely wide angle with the ankle, which is adorned with a geometric henna tattoo. At the tip of the big toe a new drop is taking shape, ready to fall onto his forehead. He moves away, letting it blot onto a white lily, the sole decoration on his balcony. Laura's blood leaves its mark on the spotless flower. And Ahmed returns to the here and now. A glance at the wall clock, a green circle ringed by metal that only displays the number four. Nine-fifteen pm. It's been a long journey.

The walls of his studio are lined with the novels he has read. No bookcase, he stacks them up. His living space is gradually shrinking as he reads. He's keeping count: two point five tonnes of thrillers, all bought from M. Paul. When he gets to five tonnes he'll stop. According to his calculations, he will then have just enough room to move between his mattress and the front door. When that day comes Ahmed will slam the door shut, drop the key in the letter-box and leave without looking back.

Because of the peculiar angle, he realises at once that Laura is dead. His reading has taught him a few rules to obey if he's in a tight corner: make sure no-one spots you, don't leave any prints. Etc. Something else seems obvious: they want him to carry the can. This certainty springs from a zone at the very edge of his consciousness where a collection of tiny, almost indefinable signs has built up: snippets of words heard in passing, uttered by unknown voices. A smile from Sam, the barber, that transforms itself, burning into the nape of Ahmed's neck when his back is turned. A knowing look

exchanged between two allegedly implacable enemies on the periphery of his field of vision. Little things like that, unsettling things, which he now sees have a retrospective meaning cast upon them by Laura's death – but what? Having no wish to become the prime suspect, he won't run away, yet he must find out more, work out what they're plotting and why they want to implicate him in it. Laura is still bleeding, it's not long since she was killed. Clearly, the murderer wants to incriminate his victim's neighbour, but it's likely he'll try to put some distance between them before calling the police or the papers. Ahmed has a key to the young woman's two-room apartment. He goes upstairs. The half-open door is creaking in the wind.

He nudges his way inside with his shoulder, taking care that his skin touches nothing at all. He has to see for himself. To feel. Straight ahead, in line with the corridor, the window is wide open, allowing an ominous breeze to enter. The grey sky has suddenly become overcast, black clouds rolling in from the Parc de la Villette. Muffled rumbling.

Get on with it, quick. In the centre of the main room the table has been carefully laid for two. An uncorked bottle of Bordeaux, glasses two-thirds full of wine. In a white china dish, a raw joint of pork lies in a pool of red liquid, a black-handled kitchen knife plunged right through the middle.