

Winner of the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature

The background of the cover is a dark, textured blue-grey. Overlaid on this are several rectangular panels of abstract art. In the upper right, a panel shows a close-up of a person's face in profile, wearing a blue and white striped garment. In the middle left, a panel depicts a small, stylized figure with a red head against a warm, orange and red background. In the lower left, a panel shows a close-up of a blue and white striped fabric, possibly a sleeve or a piece of clothing.

Memory in the Flesh

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The words of Malek Haddad are taken from his novels *Le Quai aux fleurs ne répond plus* and *Je t'offrirai une gazelle*.

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Memory in the Flesh

To the memory of Malek Haddad,
son of Constantine, who swore after the independence of
Algeria not to write in a language that was not his. The
blank page assassinated him. He died by the might of his
silence to become a martyr of the Arabic language and
the first writer ever to die silent, grieving, and
passionate on its behalf.

And to the memory of my father,
who may find someone there who knows Arabic
to read him this book, his book.

ONE

I STILL remember you once saying, "What went on between us was real love. What didn't happen was the stuff of love stories."

Today, now that it is all over, I can say, "If that's the case, we're lucky that it's just in a book. However, what didn't happen could fill volumes. We're also lucky in the beauty of the love we did have. What will not happen is also beautiful."

Before, I thought we could write about life only when we had recovered from our wounds; when we were able to touch old sores with a pen and not revive the pain; when we could look back free from nostalgia, madness, and a sense of grievance.

But is this really possible? We are never completely cut off from our memory. Recollection provides the inspiration for writing, the stimulus for drawing, and for some, the motivation even for death.

"Would you like some coffee?" 'Atiqa's voice drifts by, as if it was a question directed at somebody else. Apologizing wordlessly to the face of sadness I have been wearing for days. At that instant my voice deserts me.

I answer with a nod. She slips out silently and returns minutes later with a large, copper, coffee tray, bearing a pitcher, cups, sugar bowl, orange-flower water, and a plate of sweets. In other cities, coffee is served already poured in a cup with a piece of

sugar and a spoon next to it. But Constantine is a city that abhors shortcuts. It puts everything on permanent display. It wears its entire wardrobe and says all it knows. Even grief is a public festival there.

I gather up the papers scattered in front of me, making room for the coffee—as if I am making space for you. Some are old, rough scribbles, others are blank sheets that have been around for days, waiting for just a few words to breathe energy into them and to bring them alive. Words are all that is needed to go from silence to speech, from memory to oblivion but . . . I leave the sugar at one side and sip my bitter coffee. I recall your love. I think of the tart taste of the unsweetened drink and feel able to write about you.

Nervously, I light a cigarette and chase through the smoke for the words that for years have seared my soul, words whose fire has never been quenched by ink. Is paper a dustbin for the memory, a place where we always deposit the ash of the last cigarette of nostalgia, the remnants of the final disappointment? Which one of us lights up or stubs out the other? I really do not know. Before you, I never wrote anything worth mentioning. Because of you, I put pen to paper.

Eventually I will find the right phrases. It is my right now to choose the way in which my tale is told. I have not chosen this story. It would not have been mine at all had destiny not inserted you in every one of its chapters.

How come this confusion? How is it that the white surface of these transformed pages is from the huge blank canvasses still leaning against a studio wall that was once mine?

Why do the letters of the alphabet run away just in the way colors used to desert me before, turning my world into a black-and-white television program? I see an old tape of my memory in the way television shows old silent movies.

I have always envied those artists who can switch effortlessly from painting to writing, simply as if they are moving from one compartment of the mind to another, or shifting to a new woman without seeing the previous one off. But I am not like that. I am a one-woman man.

Here is the pen then, at once a tool of vibes and jibes. Here is

a tool that does not know how to lie, how to veil the truth, and is unable to gloss over a gaping wound.

Here are the words I have been deprived of, as naked as I want them to be, painful in the way that I want. So why does fear paralyze my hand and prevent me from writing? Am I only now realizing that I have swapped the brush for a dagger and that writing of you is as lethal as your love?

I sit down to sip your bitter coffee, this time with a wary pleasure. I feel almost as though I have found an introductory sentence for the book, a phrase that could be as a line from a letter. For example:

I'm writing to you from a city that bears your picture. I have come to resemble the city. Birds still swoop busily across those bridges, while I, hanging around here, have become another bridge. Don't love bridges anymore . . .

Or something else, like this:

*I thought of you while sipping a coffee. . . .
Fate decreed that you had to add a lump of sugar, just one.
So why do we need a fancy tray just for a single, bitter drink?*

I could have written anything, because in the end, novels are just the letters and greeting cards we write for no special purpose; where we reveal the climate of our souls for those who care to take any interest in us.

The most beautiful novel is the one that starts with a sentence wholly unexpected by the reader who has lived through our storms and norms, and who might once have been the cause of our changing moods.

Sentences crowd up in my head, phrases you would never expect. Suddenly the memories pour back.

I gulp the coffee down and throw the window open to escape from you to the autumn sky, to the trees and bridges and the passers-by. To a city I have regained, this time for another reason, a city where you made an appointment for me.

This is Constantine. Here is everything: you.

Through that window that you knew years ago, there streams in the same call to prayer, the street cries of peddlers, the clattering footsteps of women clad in black, and songs that waft up from a loudspeaker that never wearies.

O apple, o apple . . . tell me why people adore you.

The banality of the fruit-seller's song stops me short.

It forces me face to face with my homeland. It reminds me without any glimmer of doubt that I am in an Arab city. The years I spent in Paris seem a fanciful dream.

Is singing to fruit an Arab phenomenon? Or is it because only apples still carry the flavor of our original sin and are so delicious that people in more than one Arab country sing to them?

And what if you were an apple?

But no, you were not an apple.

But you were the woman who seduced me into eating it. You were practicing the instinctive game of Eve and I was unable to resist. With you, I was as foolish as Adam.

"Hello, Si Khalid, how are you today?"

A neighbor gazes at me, peeling off layers of my melancholy, and greets me. He seems surprised at my morning appearance, standing at the back of a balcony of distraction. I follow his steps with an absentminded look as he heads to the nearby mosque, tramping in step with others, some sauntering and others with a determined stride, but all heading to the same destination.

The whole of my homeland is on its way to pray while a loudspeaker celebrates the eating of apples. The roofs around the minaret are littered with antennae that absorb foreign channels from the heavens. Every night, they cast onto the screen all manner of hi-tech ways of tasting forbidden fruit. Actually, I do not like fruit, least of all apples. I was in love with you, but what was my crime? Though your love came to me as a sin, why was I guilty?

"Hello there, how are you?" another neighbor calls as he heads for prayers. My tongue utters a few terse words in his direction before silently asking about you.

How am I? I am the result of what you have done to me,

madam. And how are you? You are the woman who cloaked my nostalgia with madness, who gradually assumed the features of a city and the contours of a country.

And then, when time was not looking, this woman became my world. It was as if I were entering compartments of my memory that had been deserted for years.

How are you?

You were Constantine's mulberry tree, every season in black. You were the city's love, its clothes, its joys, its misery, and its lovers.

Tell me, where are you now?

This Constantine has cold hands and feet, fervid lips and fevered moods.

That is the long and short of it.

You are so like the city today. If only you knew.

Let me close the window.

Marcel Pagnol used to say, "Think always of ordinary events, the kind that may actually happen."

Is not death, in the end, ordinary, just like birth, love, marriage, sickness, aging, being among strangers, going mad, and so on? How long is the list of ordinary events that we expect to be extraordinary until they actually occur? Such things that we think happen only to others and that life, for some reason, will spare us for the most part, until one day we find ourselves staring them in the face.

When today I look back through my life, I realize that the only truly exceptional event was meeting you. It was the only thing I could not have foreseen, because I did not then know that exceptional events carry in their train many ordinary occurrences as well.

Nonetheless, even now I wonder, after all these years, where I should place your love. Is it in the storehouse of ordinary things that may happen to any of us any day, like falling ill or tripping up or going insane?

Where do I place it?

As an exceptional event? As a gift from a planet that eluded even astronomers? As a tremor that did not register on any seismographic chart? Were you an accident or a jest of fate?

I skim through the morning paper looking for convincing answers to an ordinary event that changed the course of my life and brought me here. After all these years, I look at the pages of our misery, and the black ink of Algeria rubs off on my hands. The readers of some newspapers have to wash their hands after touching them, though not always for the same reason. One stains your hands and the other—better printed—pollutes your mind. Is it because newspapers always look like their owners? I think our newspapers start the day the same way the rest of us do, with sleepy features and a face hurriedly washed before rushing into the street without taking the trouble to comb their hair or put on the right tie.

October 25, 1988.

Banner headlines and a lake of black ink, much blood and little sensitivity. Some newspapers sell you the same pictures on their front page every day, adding just a new twist. Some papers sell you the same lies every day in a less intelligent way. Others sell you a ticket to escape from your own world—nothing more than that.

But since that is not possible anymore, I will fold up the paper and go and wash my hands. The last time any Algerian publication captured my attention was about two months ago. I happened to be scanning a magazine and was jolted by a picture of you filling up a whole page. There was an interview in which you talked about the launch of your new book. My eyes were glued that day to the picture. In vain, I tried to work out what you were saying. I read your words, but in my haste I stumbled over them and became confused. It was as if I was the one talking to you about myself and not you talking to others about a story that probably had nothing to do with us.

What kind of bizarre rendezvous did we have that day? How come I did not expect, after all those years, that you would make an appointment with me on paper between two pages of a magazine that I do not usually read? Murphy's law, right? Just my luck that I happen to buy a magazine I do not usually read that turns my life upside down.

And do you know why it is bizarre? Were you not a woman

of print? You loved and hated in print. You ran off and came back in print. You killed and revived to life at the stroke of a pen.

How could I not be confused when I was reading you? How could an electric shiver not run down my spine and send my heart into overdrive? It was as if I were in front of you, not in front of a picture of you. Every time I went back to look at that photograph, I wondered how you managed to come back into my life and haunt me. I am the one who avoided every road that led toward you.

So how did you come back?

The wound was just beginning to heal, and the heart that had been loaded with the memory of you was gradually liberating itself from you. You were packing up the baggage of love and leaving soon to take possession of the heart of another.

So you left my heart then. It was like a tourist leaving a city he has visited on a package holiday. Everything has been scheduled in advance, even the hour of departure. Every detail has been planned ahead of time, even the tickets for tourist attractions, the name of the play they are going to see and the shops where they will buy their souvenirs.

Was your trip that boring? There I was, in front of your picture, confused and bewildered, as if I was really looking at you. Your new hairstyle surprised me: it was short. Your hair used to be like a scarf that was so long it shut out the solitude of my nights. What did you do to it?

I stopped and gazed long at your eyes. I sought in them a memory of my first defeat at your hands.

Once there was nothing more beautiful than your eyes, but how they made me sometimes sad, sometimes happy! Have they changed as well, or is it the way I see you that has changed? I kept looking at your face for signs of my former madness. I almost failed to recognize your lips and your smile with its new lipstick.

How could I once have seen a resemblance to my mother in you? How could I have imagined you wearing her dress, kneading dough with those long polished nails, making bread the taste of which I have missed for years?

What kind of mad idiocy was that?

Has marriage really changed your expressions and your child-

like laugh? Has it also changed your memory and the taste of your lips and the gypsy hue of your skin?

Did that impoverished prophet make you forget? The one who was stripped of the Ten Commandments on his way to you? The one who brought you only the Eleventh Commandment?

There you were in front of me, wearing the dress of a heretic. You have chosen another path and wear another face, one I no longer recognize, a face that looks out at us from magazines or from adverts in a shop window, draped to sell something. It could be toothpaste or anti-wrinkle cream.

Or maybe you wore that mask only to promote merchandise in the form of a book that you called *The Corner of Oblivion*, merchandise that could be the story of my life with you and the memory of my pain.

Of course, this could be just the latest method you have discovered of killing me again today, a method that avoids leaving your fingerprints on my neck.

I remember a conversation we had that day when I asked you why you chose specifically to write a novel. What you said amazed me. I could not figure out to what degree you were telling the truth and how much you were lying as you answered with a smile, "I had to put some order into my life and get rid of some old furniture. Our spirits also need refurbishing, just like any house we live in. I can't keep my windows closed indefinitely. The only reason we write novels is to kill off heroes and do away with people whose existence has become a burden. Every time we write about them we purge them from our system and breathe in fresh air."

You paused.

"In fact, every successful novel," you added, "is a kind of crime we commit against some memory and maybe against someone. We carry out a completely silent murder in full view of everyone and only the victim realizes that the lethal words are intended for him.

"Unsuccessful novels are merely botched crimes, and their authors should be banned from carrying a pen on the grounds that they don't know how to manipulate words. They might end up murdering the wrong person by mistake—including

themselves. That, in addition to killing their readers with boredom."

Why did your sadistic tendencies not arouse my suspicions that day, and why did I not anticipate all those crimes that followed when you tried out all your other weapons? I did not expect then that one day you would point your arsenal in my direction. That is why I laughed at your words. Maybe I admired you in another way that day, because in such circumstances we cannot resist the mad folly of admiring our killer.

Anyhow, I expressed my surprise. "I used to think," I said, "that a novel was the way writers lived a love story a second time. Their way of giving immortality to those whom they had loved."

Apparently my reply surprised you as well. You looked as though you had come upon something you had not accounted for.

"That could be true," you said, "because in the end we kill only those we have loved. We give them a kind of literary immortality as compensation. That's fair, isn't it?"

Fair! Who can play around with tyrants about their sense of fairness or oppression? Who discussed matters with Nero on the day he burned Rome out of love and pyromania? And you, are you not like him? A woman whose professional craft shows an equally fiery passion? Were you even then anticipating my imminent demise and trying to console me in advance for my disaster? Or maybe you were playing with words as usual, observing their impact on me and secretly enjoying my constant amazement, my astonishment at your remarkable capacity for saying things that fit in with your contradictions.

Everything was possible.

For I might have been the victim of this novel of yours and also the corpse that you have sentenced to immortality, mummifying him with words . . . as usual.

But perhaps I was just the victim of my own illusion, and it was your lies that looked like honesty. Because only you know in the end, the answer to all these questions that have obsessed me with the stubbornness of someone searching vainly for the truth.

When did you write that book?

Was it before or after you got married? Before or after Ziad died? Did you write about me or about him? Did you write it to

kill me off or to bring him back to life? Or to finish us both off, to kill us together in a single book, just as you left us both for the sake of another man?

When I read that news item a couple of months ago, I had absolutely no idea that you would return with your abiding presence, and that your book would become the center of my thoughts and a vicious solitary treadmill. After all that had happened, I was simply unable to go looking for it in bookshops, to hand over money to a bookseller just to buy my own story. Nor could I ignore it and carry on with my life as if I had never heard of it, or as if it did not concern me at all.

Did I not burn to read the rest of the story? You know, the one that ended when my back was turned? The one whose final chapters I did not know, chapters in which I was an absent witness after being the opening character of the book? It was just my luck to be always simply a witness and a victim in a story that had room for only one hero.

I have your book now. It is in front of me but I cannot read it today, so I have left it on my table, closed like a mystery, threatening me like a time bomb, its silent presence helping me to detonate a mine of words inside me and to jolt my own memory.

Everything in the book provokes me now. The title you chose is an obvious trick, and your smile in the photo takes no account of my distress. Your expression—devoid of all emotion—treats me as an ordinary reader, someone who does not know much about you.

Everything . . . even your name.

Maybe your name provokes me most because it leaps around in my memory even before the letters that spell it reach my eye. Your name is not one to be read, but to be heard, like music played on a solo instrument for an audience of one.

How can I read the book without feeling that it represents an episode from the incidental crossing of the destinies of our lives that day? The blurb on the back of the book says that its publication is a literary event.

I hide the book beneath a pile of notes I have written on in moments of delusion.

"It's time," I say to myself, "for you to write or to be silent

forever, man, because what's happening these days is very strange."

Then suddenly the cold makes the decision for me. The Constantine night creeps up on me from my window of exile. I put the top back on my pen and slide under my blanket of loneliness.

I realized that every city gets the night it deserves, the night that reflects its character, showing the only thing that reveals the city's guilty secrets, casting off in the dark what it conceals during the day. Because of this, I resolve not to look out of the window after dark.

All cities lay themselves bare at night without realizing it, and silently disclose their secrets to strangers. Even when they lock their doors. And because cities are like women, some of them make us hasten the coming of the dawn but . . .

Soirs, soirs, que de soirs pour un seul matin . . .

How am I able to call to mind that line by Henri Michou? I repeat it to myself in more than one language.

Evenings, evenings, so many evenings for a single morning . . .

How am I able to call it to mind and when, I wonder, did I memorize it? Is it because for years I expected miserable evenings like this one that will have only a single morning? I dig into my memory for the whole poem from which this line is taken. I realize that it is called "Old Age."

My discovery suddenly scares me as if with it I am finding new features in my own face. Does old age overtake us in just one, single, long night? And in an interior darkness that slows us up in every way and makes us walk slowly with no clear direction? Could boredom, loss, and monotony be some part of the characteristics of old age or are they characteristics of this city? Is it me who is entering old age, or is the entire country now entering an era of collective decline? Does the country not hold some superior power both to make us grow old and to become old in a few months, sometimes in just a few weeks?

Until today I never felt the burden of years. Your love was my youth, my studio was my boundless solar energy, and Paris was an elegant city whose appearance one would be ashamed to ignore. But they pursued me and haunted me there in my exile and extinguished the flame of my passion and drove me all the way here.

Now we are standing on our country's erupting volcano. We have no longer any alternative but to become one with the lava flying from its mouth and to forget about our own small fires. Today, nothing is worthy of all this elegance and these manners. No longer is our country ashamed to present itself so ineptly.

There is nothing more difficult than to start writing at an age when others have finished saying everything. Writing for the first time after the age of fifty is something at once both sensual and insane, a reversion to adolescence. Something exciting but also dumb, resembling a love affair between a man in decline and a new pen! The former, confused and in a hurry, the latter an eager virgin that all the ink in the world would fail to satisfy.

Since that is the case, I reckon that what I have penned so far is just a preparation for real writing and an excess of lust for these sheets that I have for years dreamt of filling.

Maybe tomorrow I will start writing properly. I always like to relate important events in my life that then stir another memory.

This idea seduced me again when I was listening to the news this evening. I realized—I, who had lost all sense of time—I realized that tomorrow would be the first of November. How could I do other than start a book on such a date? On the first of November, thirty-four years ago, the first bullet in the War of Liberation was fired, and I arrived here three weeks ago on the anniversary of the date of the fall of the last group of martyrs.

One of those martyrs was the man whose body I brought here to be buried.

Between the first and last bullets, objectives changed. Aims changed and our country changed. That is why tomorrow will be a day of mourning for the loss of the dues that have already been paid. There will be no military parade, no receptions, no official commemorations. People will just hurl accusations at each other while we go and visit the graves.

I will not visit that grave tomorrow. I do not wish to share my grief with my country. I prefer the dignified silence of a piece of paper.

Everything is spurring me on tonight, and I feel as if I could at last write something striking and not tear it all up as I usually do.

How painful is the coincidence that brings me back here, after