

ONE NIGHT, I LOST my language. My mother tongue. I was hardly five years old, and I'd lived in France for only a few weeks. I no longer spoke my language, a spoken language, a language of fairy tales, of ogres and legends. One night, a night of dreams and nightmares, gave me over to another language, that of Europe. I became hers one night, that night when, sleeping, I met an army of elephants.

Dream elephants lumber through the half-light.

They're one inside the other, and the other inside the one, and me inside them all.

Inside I'm suffocating.

They walk through me and over me. I push out.

Inside the stomachs of the elephants, I push out, I escape.

I'm taken in again, and I push out. And again inside another, and I push out.

I swim inside their stomachs, using my arms and legs,

*and I escape. And I enter again inside. I push out, swimming,
I escape.*

And then inside another.

I push out, I escape, I'm taken inside another.

I push out,

I escape, I reach out,

I touch the door,

I open it.

*Swimming, I pull the door open, I pass inside, I close
the door.*

Behind the door, elephants.

Behind the door, no words.

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out.

Without words, no language.

Without words, no dreams. No words.

They're behind me. I'm outside. Alone.

*A voice says to me, "Drive the black and solemn
horses . . ."*

I fall.

I fell, speechless, into the day.

“What are you doing out in the hallway?” my mother asked in a language that I refused to speak. No longer. No, no longer. I was sitting in front of

my bedroom door. I knew that there was something dangerous on the other side. I thought I had locked it. The sun was just about up. I was sweating, trembling. I remember saying to her, “Elephants.” I said, “Elephants,” but it wasn’t in her language. I was scared. I couldn’t tell her. I had nothing to say. Algeria was behind us. I’d just got to France. There were elephants in my room, and my brother and sister were still inside. I’d left them with the elephants. I’d fled the elephants, I’d left everything behind. My brother, my sister. My mother, my language. Everything was upside down. I no longer had a name.

I’d forgotten this dream. Were it not for the new terror that threatens the world, I would never have remembered it.

FOR MUSLIMS, THE NIGHT OF THE ELEPHANT marks the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. It was, the tradition says, when the army of Abraha, King of the Abyssinians, attacked Mecca. It is said that they were mounted on elephants procured from unknown parts, and upon these animals they set out to destroy the town. Seeing the animals, the city’s people became scared. The elephants chased them into the mountains.

But it was due to divine grace that thousands upon thousands of birds arrived to pelt the elephants with stones. The army fell into disarray. It was a debacle. The soldiers died of infections. And the town, now holy, was saved. That night, there, the first Muslim was born.

I can't deny what lies behind me. I can't forget the difficult journey. It was suffocating. It was elephants upon elephants. It was one inside another, I went from one stomach to another. I pushed out from inside, and I escaped. Who had taught me about them, the elephants? And when and where? Who put them in my room? How did they find me? Were they at war with me? I couldn't breathe. They were squashing me, but I didn't know why. Why me? They were infinite, there was no end to them, one inside the next, invading my space. I fought them. I went out to fight them.

“Do you see what your Lord did to the Elephant Men?” says the Quran. “Did he not shred to pieces their plan? He sent wave after wave of birds against them, He cast stones against them as a sign. He laid waste to them.”

Could I defeat such an army? I survived. I left. I left them behind. Hadn't I heard my mother's stories

about the birth of the baby Muhammad? I was young, I heard the stories in her language. But I'd left this story behind. Why hadn't I followed history? If the people of Mecca had fled the elephants, why had I entered inside them?

I was born into the world in a minor language. A language that was passed on orally, a language that was never read. We called it Tamazight. A Berber language that throughout the incursions of history was guarded tightly by its people for what it knew. For the people of the Atlas Mountains, in the regions of Kabylie, in the Aures Mountains, where the Mozabites and Tuareg lived, it was in their language and in their spoken traditions that Islam was introduced.

“Speak the word, speak the word, speak the word,” the Archangel Gabriel said to Muhammad. “Speak what I tell you, and people will come to you.” And it is said that the voice that came from on high spoke to Muhammad in Arabic poetry. It is said that anyone who hears it will be moved. And was it for this reason that his wife and his nearest friends understood that he was no ordinary man? They listened to him, and they spread the word. And so the people came to Muhammad. They came and came, and more

came after that. He told them, “We’re all the children of Abraham.” His every word was like a world unto itself. His presence was radiant. He was the Prophet. So he had to leave Mecca. The vendors of idols hated him, and they chased him out. He had to decide on a place. It was Yathrib in Medina, a town where the memory of the tribes of Israel and their rituals was still fresh. His disciples went before him, one by one. Then it was his turn. Whether out of affection or necessity, Muhammad liked to listen to the stories of the Jewish people, a community that modeled faithfulness to God, which he respected. He wanted to listen to all of the stories—about Noah and his sons, about Lot and his brothers, about Isaac, Sarah, and Ishmael, about Pharaoh, Moses, and Aaron, about Job and his miseries, about Elijah, about Solomon, about Jacob and David. He wanted to hear about their rules for daily life, which he would use to make his own. And they translated these from Hebrew into his language. It was said that Zayd, the youngest of his scribes, had been Jewish. He still went to Jewish school. And, as for the second, Ubayy, it is said that he was a rabbi before his conversion. Upon the death of the Prophet, it was up to them to keep alive his memory, his grandeur, and

his glory. They knew his verses by heart. A little while later, they passed the knowledge on to Uthman, the Caliph and the new guide of the community. With the gift of their manuscripts, with the writing out of the Book, they became bound to it. To this word, they added other stories, which they had heard or which had come to them by other means. Perhaps they omitted some stories as well. What exactly constitutes the divine word will be argued over forever, it is said, beneath the watchful eye of God and his Prophet. They made the Quran, the holy book of “Muslims.” And Arabic, as a language, was reborn. It would be the language of this adventure. The language of Islam.

Reading the Quran, reading this book that defies comprehension, you will understand that it came to us through foreign languages, those of the Old and New Testament. By taking up the spoken word of others, by taking up its stories, replacing certain versions with others, and in passing them on to people who were ignorant of them, to people who didn't speak Arabic, to people who had never learned to read, Islam opened up the world for them for a while. An endless story. Those who didn't speak Arabic, and those Arabs unfamiliar with the history of monotheism, should

they have refused this story? Those who told the stories of the Quran to the illiterate were intermediaries, translators. And, since then, it was not in Arabic at all that millions of men and women heard the message of the Prophet. Islam wasn't limited to just one language. And so long as time remains, mothers indoctrinated by the one true word will continue to raise their children through the grace of words. The book of history has been opened wider.

The stories from Arabic enriched my language as well as many others. And it was for this gift, this gift of history, and its connection to languages, that Arabic was for a long time revered. To reprise a book, to speak of its origins, to speak of what it contains, to speak of its language and its varieties, that is to define that book. And not to read the Quran in that way is to admit that it has won. The ignorance of our times is unbridled, but languages had known how to find instruction in Islam. In its linguistic tradition, they had a treasure.

I couldn't tell this to anyone in France, I was a child. I lived inside a language that I couldn't pass on. It was like in the story of Miriam where the storyteller can't stop until all of the listeners have

fallen asleep. I didn't know how to control it. If I approached it a thousand times, it would unravel each time. On the Night of the Elephant I didn't run away, I entered into them. Into their stomachs. What could I have believed in? That I could defeat them by myself? Defeat whom? Could I make them retreat? Change the course of history? I left everything behind—Muhammad, the elephants, and my family. The elephants were still there, approaching the city, tramping toward a battle that would kill them all. The Night of the Elephants was the birth of Muslims. I didn't want to be one. And in France, I was taken to be an Arab, even though I wasn't, even though their language and ways were foreign to me. I left them, left them behind in my cube-like room. I separated myself from them.

I REMEMBER HOW ONE TIME when I was a teenager I looked at a poster advertising a circus and its special elephant act. And when they came into the ring, I wasn't disappointed. Their imposing size impressed me. There were quite a few of them, one following closely upon the next, with their children behind them. But as soon as the trainer had arranged them

in a circle and made them sit on their haunches, I grew overwhelmed by anger and disgust. Seeing them sitting on their rear ends with their front feet raised to greet the audience made me sad. I was ashamed. I became emotional. I know this confession is ridiculous. I left the elephants, and I left the circus. It was humiliating what they were doing to them. For these marvelous beasts that had brought so much to the world, that had worn the world on their shoulders, was there nothing left other than this as a means to live?

WHEN I WAS A CHILD, I was told I was a child of Adam and Eve. That I was sister to Cain and Abel. That I was the daughter of the son of Abraham. But as for the sons of Abraham, both of them circumcised, I didn't know which he had taken to Mount Moriah—his son born of Hagar, the slave, or his son Isaac, born of Sarah. I didn't know which son had been elected. The first text said Isaac. But the Quran, meant to overturn everything that preceded it, corrected this history by omitting the name of the sacrificed. So which lineage was mine? I guarded this enigma as though it were a treasure. So they had erased a name. Perhaps they didn't dare to put another in its place.