

mainly against possible Jordanian operations, young soldiers would take care of their weapons, disassemble them to clean and grease them, then reassemble them quickly. Some managed this feat of disassembling and reassembling their weapons blindfolded so they could do it at night. Between each soldier and his weapon a loving, magical bond had developed. Since the fedayeen had only recently left adolescence behind, the rifle, as a weapon, was the sign of triumphant virility and gave assurance of being. Aggressiveness disappeared: teeth showed behind the smile.

The rest of the time, the fedayeen drank tea, criticized their leaders and the rich, Palestinian and others, insulted Israel, and above all they talked about the revolution, the one they were involved in and the one they were about to enter upon.

For me, the word «Palestinians,» whether in a headline, in the body of an article, on a handout, immediately calls to mind fedayeen in a specific spot-Jordan-and at an easily determined date: October, November, December 1970, January, February, March, April 1971. It was then and there that I discovered the Palestinian Revolution. The extraordinary evidence of what was happening, the intensity of this joy at being alive is also called beauty.

Ten years went by, and I heard nothing about them, except that the fedayeen were in Lebanon. The European press spoke off-handedly, even disdainfully, about the Palestinian people. Then suddenly, West Beirut.

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A photograph has two dimensions, so does a television screen; neither can be walked through. From one wall of the street to the other, bent or arched, with their feet pushing against one wall and their heads pressing against the other, the black and bloated corpses that I had to step over were all Palestinian and Lebanese. For me, as for what remained of the population, walking through Shatila and Sabra resembled a game of hopscotch. Sometimes a dead child blocked the streets: they were so small, so narrow, and the dead so numerous. The smell is probably familiar to old people; it didn't bother me. But there were so many flies. If I lifted the hand-

kerchief or the Arab newspaper placed over a head, I disturbed them. Infuriated by my action, they swarmed onto the back of my hand and tried to feed there. The first corpse I saw was that of a man fifty or sixty years old. He would have had a shock of white hair if a wound (an axe blow, it seemed to me) hadn't split his skull. Part of the blackened brain was on the ground, next to the head. The whole body was lying in a pool of black and clotted blood. The belt was unbuckled, a single button held the pants. The dead man's feet and legs were bare and black, purple and blue; perhaps he had been taken by surprise at night or at dawn. Was he running away? He was lying in a little alley immediately to the right of the entry to Shatila camp which is across from the Kuwaiti Embassy. Did the Shatila massacre take place in hushed tones or in total silence, if the Israelis, both soldiers and officers, claim to have heard nothing, to have suspected nothing whereas they had been occupying this building since Wednesday afternoon?...

Which alley should I take now? I was drawn by men fifty years old, by young men of twenty, by two old Arab women, and I felt as if I were the center of a compass whose quadrants contained hundreds of dead.

I jot this down now, not knowing exactly why at this point in my narrative: «The French have a habit of using the insipid expression 'dirty work.' Well, just like the Israeli army ordered the Kataeb or the Haddadists to do their 'dirty work,' the Labor Party had its 'dirty work' done by the Likud, Begin, Sharon, Shamir.» I have just quoted R., a Palestinian journalist who was still in Beirut on Sunday, September 19.

In the middle, near them, all these tortured victims, my mind can't get rid of this "invisible vision": what was the torturer like? Who was he? I see him and I don't see him. He's as large as life and the only shape he will ever have is the one formed by the stances, positions, and grotesque gestures of the dead fermenting in the sun under clouds of flies.

If the American Marines, the French paratroopers, and the Italian bersagliere who made up an intervention force in Lebanon left so quickly (the Italians, who arrived by ship two days

late, fled in Hercules airplanes!) one day or thirty-six hours before their official departure date, as if they were running away, and on the day before Bashir Gemayel's assassination, are the Palestinians really wrong in wondering if Americans, French and Italians had not been warned to clear out pronto so as not to appear mixed up in the bombing of the Kataeb headquarters?

They left very quickly and very early. Israel brags and boasts about its combat efficiency, its battle preparedness, its skill in turning circumstances to its favor, in creating circumstances. Let's see; the PLO leaves Beirut in triumph, on a Greek ship, with a naval escort. Bashir, hiding as best he can, visits Begin in Israel. The intervention of the three armies (American, French, Italian) comes to an end on Monday. On Tuesday, Bashir is assassinated. Tsahal [Israel Defense Forces] enters West Beirut on Wednesday morning. As if they were coming from the port, Israeli soldiers were advancing on Beirut the morning of Bashir's funeral. With binoculars, from the eighth floor of my house I saw them coming in single file: one column. I was surprised that nothing else happened, because with a good rifle with a sight they could have been picked off. Their brutality preceded them...

The Palestinian woman-for I couldn't leave Shatila without going from one corpse to another and this jeu de l'oie would inevitably end up at this miracle: Shatila and Sabra razed to the ground and real estate battles to rebuild on this very flat cemetery—the Palestinian woman was probably elderly because her hair was gray. She was stretched out on her back, laid or left there on the rubble, the bricks, the twisted iron rods, without comfort. At first I was surprised by a strange braid made of rope and cloth which went from one wrist to the other, holding the two arms apart horizontally, as if crucified. Her black and swollen face, turned towards the sky, revealed an open mouth, black with flies, and teeth that seemed very white to me, a face that seemed, without moving a muscle, either to grin or smile or else to cry out in a silent and unbroken scream. Her stockings were black wool, and her pink and gray flowered dress, slightly hiked up or too short, I don't know which, revealed the tops of swollen black calves, again with the delicate mauve tints matched by a similar purple