

I'm running on Chenoua Beach, running with my friend Amine. I follow the foam-filled waves, white explosions. I'm running with the sea that rises and falls beneath the Roman ruins, running in the still-warm winter light. I fall on the sand. I hear the sea advancing, the sound of freighters leaving Africa. I belong to the sand, the sea, and the wind. I am in Algeria. France is far away, behind the huge and dangerous waves. It is invisible and imagined. Amine and I fall together. I hold his hand. We are alone, and we are foreigners. His mother is waiting in the white car. She is cold. She stays inside, protected from the waves, the wind, and the nostalgia of the Roman ruins. She is waiting for our race to end. Amine could be my brother.

Men emerge from the dunes, four of them. They are in a hurry. They walk hastily toward the sea: a meeting. They sketch grand gestures with their arms. They are speaking Arabic. Their voices carry across the beach, echoing in the waves and the wind. I feel mesmerized. They brush against our bodies and continue walking past us, their arms reaching toward the horizon. I remember one word only: *el bahr, el bahr, el bahr*.¹ Repeated enchantments.

Do they know about France? Are they awaiting the next freighter? Do they know that the sea is infinite?

They leave the beach without looking at us. We don't exist. I start the race again and laugh. I'm happier than Amine. The sea sustains me. It engulfs everything and obsesses me. The sea comes before the dream of France, before the journey. It was there before I felt fear.

1. The sea, the sea, the sea.

Amine's eyes are sad. Here, we are nothing. Born of French mothers. Born of Algerian fathers. Our bodies alone reunite the conflicting lands.



My Algerian life is full of anxiety. I run, dive, and cross the street quickly. The street is off-limits. Rue d'Isly, rue Didouche-Mourad, rue Dienot, Le Telemny. The street on the other side of the car window is forbidden, unreal, and filled with children. The street is a dream. My Algerian heart beats outside of the city. It belongs to the sea and the desert at the foot of the Atlas Mountains. Here, my body is erased and becomes unrecognizable. I become a nondescript body, a body without language, without nationality. This life is brutal. It is voiceless and faceless. Agitated, I sleep badly and eat little. Amine mirrors my insanity. We run together, faster and faster. We flee.

We devour one another.

I leave Algiers far behind and head toward the silence. I return transformed, sensitive. I stay in my room. I talk to myself for a long time. I have a secret. I come from an uncommon union. I am both France and Algeria.

I'm protected from the street, the voices, the gestures, the stares. I'm fragile, they say. They exclude me. Amine stays with me. Always. He keeps the secret. He is the secret: it's in his skin, his eyes, and his accent. We change our names. We pretend to be in France. The RTA² shapes our dreams. It broadcasts powerful images that haunt us for a long time. It's as if another world has trespassed the borders of our own confined world. I know the dialogues, faces, and music. I learn fast, mimic, and memorize everything. We never stop playing this game. We build a wall, a prison within a prison.

We overthrow the city.



2. Radio-télévision algérienne.

Amine's father returns from Tizi-Ouzou with two white burnouses. Gifts, he says. We put them on right away, pulling the hoods down over our heads. We cross our arms inside the wide, unsown sleeves. We disappear. Walking across the garden, we take small steps.

The burnouses are too long. They cover our whole bodies, drowning them. We become fragile and lost in the traditional dress that betrays our inability to live out a part of ourselves. We will always hesitate. We will never be real Algerians. Despite our will and longing. Despite the clothing. Despite the land that surrounds us.

Amine can say a few words in Arabic. His accent is too perfect. I don't respond. I am no longer playing. I distance myself. I know our limitations. I'm aware that proficiency is followed by feelings of incompetence. I know the difference that separates us from others, the difference in our blood.

I know vertigo, Amine.

Who are we?

His mother takes a photo of us. She will send the image of her son in disguise to her family, her French family. She'll spread our lie. The dog is circling us. He is barking at the two imposters.



I don't speak Arabic. My voice says the letters of the alphabet, â, bâ, tâ, thâ, then vanishes. It's a ravenous voice, a voice that is a stranger to the language that it enunciates. I say words without understanding them.

Despite our hopes, it's a language that does not stick. I take courses in classical Arabic. They are required. They call us the Arabists. I learn the grammar and forget it. It's a fleeting language that escapes me, a slippage. I pronounce the very difficult *hâ* and *rhâ*. I recognize the sounds of *el chekl*.³ But the meaning escapes me, leaving me empty.

I study Arabic for fifteen years, submerging myself deeply into my silence. I hold back, not understanding the voices that rise from

3. A group of signs that indicates the pronunciation of each word.

the streets. I invent another language, speaking Arabic in my own fashion. I interpret and keep lying, out of habit.

This language slipping through my fingers like sand makes me suffer. It leaves its scars, a few words, and disappears. It doesn't take to me. This language rejects me. It separates me from others and disrupts my lineage. It's an absence. I am powerless, an invalid and a foreigner. My land slips away from me. I am here, different, and French. But I'm Algerian: it's in my face, my eyes, my skin, my body inhabited by the body of my grandparents. I bear within me the smell of their house, the taste of pancakes and croquettes, the color of dresses, the songs, and the noise of jangling bangles. I remember Rabiâ's hand on my feverish face. I remember Bachir's voice beckoning his children. His voice rises above everything else. It continues to resonate, satisfying the longing. His voice is eternal, powerful. His voice links me to others, uniting me with the land, connecting me to Algeria.



My mother makes me a foreigner by her mere presence at my side: her blond hair, her blue eyes, and her white skin. She walks down the street, squeezing my hand, holding my body close to hers. She draws me to her hip. It's our last stroll. My mother is a challenge. She is aware of it. She walks by the men without looking. Her eyes reach all the way to the sea. She spurns the city, a dark, dense forest outlined against the luminous sky. She's in danger. I am here. I protect her, despite myself. My unrelenting gaze bristles. The men brush against us and keep walking. They whisper. A child is a perfect excuse, a protection. A child cuts like a blade. I become my mother. I become her dress, her scent that lingers behind, and her coveted skin. A hand touches her hair then retreats by the sheer force of my merciless face. To touch. To know. To understand. My mother is a treasure. Amine and I take the place of our fathers. Finally, we are two real Algerians.



A French woman says to my mother: “Why is there so much furniture in your house? Some day they’ll take everything. Why put on makeup? They don’t see us. Why put on perfume? Nothing takes here. Scents turn sour. The heat burns through the skin, to the flesh. For now we are stationed in Algiers. Then we’ll do West Africa.” On Moretti Beach a young man is drowning, way out there, lost already, so far away. He calls out. She speaks again: “Why go out there to save him and risk one’s life? There are so many of them. All these brown bodies, packed together, all these people.”

Ignoring this disapproving voice, my father runs toward the sea. He swims swiftly, pulled by the other voice, the voice of the drowning man. He is already there, lifting the body. He swims back to shore, burdened. He lays a young Algerian down on the sand. It could be his brother Amar. It could be the body of Amar, who was killed in the war. It could be his older brother missing in action, his lost love. He massages the young man’s chest for a long time, doing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. He waits for a sign, for life, as the silent swimmers form a circle around the two bodies, blocking the light. Nothing separates them. My father doesn’t belong to me. He belongs to the other people who look on, overcome with sorrow. They feel all alone. The sea is a kind of violence; its waves, its sound, and its smell are constant.

The drowned man is thin and brown-haired. His face is smooth. His eyes are half-closed, as if he were dreaming. His belly is still, like a dark stone glistening with water. His hair is plastered down, his lips still wet. This man is dead. I’ll never forget him. Every man I meet will bear this image, a ghostly face that destroys childhood. He could be you, Amine. Your face. Your lowered eyes. Your hair. His body could be yours, on the edge of adulthood. He’d follow you like a shadow or a twin. But you’re not really Algerian. You only look Algerian, stricken by this French blood that gnaws away at you.



Only Amine knows my games, my mimicry. Only Amine knows my secret desires, my childhood monsters. I take on another name:

Ahmed. I throw away my dresses. I cut my hair. I make myself disappear and assimilate into the world of men. I am shameless. I endure their gaze, steal their ways, learn fast, and change my voice.

I'm not afraid of the men of Zeralda. They take over the entire beach. They dive in the water all at once, without wetting their necks, stomachs, or ankles first. They are tough. They take over the sea with their cries, their movements, their numerous bodies. They are violent. They are alive.

I adjust my blue terry cloth bathing suit. I walk with a boyish gait. I am intrigued.

Amine likes me as a boy.

We stay on the beach until the edge of night. The last hours are pink, timeless, and slow as the fire of the sun becomes a mere memory on the sand, the skin, and the hidden pine forest. We are still playing. Defying the swift approach of night, I play fast. I am methodical. I hold onto the ball as long as possible, with my head, torso, and bare feet: my fearless body. I run, in tune with the sound of the sea. The waves are voices. The freighters' siren beckons to the men of Zeralda. They come. The siren draws in all these restless bodies.

I sense the tenderness of the men of Zeralda, their interest, their indulgence. They applaud. I learn how to be in their presence. I learn how to show myself, transformed. They look at me. My body itself captivates them. My lie becomes public: by my rapid gestures, my aggressive attitude, and my broken voice. I become their son.

Here, I am the only girl who plays soccer. Here, I am the child who lies. My entire life will consist of repairing this lie.

Revisiting it. Erasing it. Being forgiven. Being a woman, becoming one finally.

My entire life will be shaped by the loss of the gentle gaze of the men of Zeralda, although they misperceive me.



The game continues at the school in Petit Hydra. It's a challenge. It's an obliteration. I displace my female self. I am always chosen by

the boys' team. I play against my team. I play my role. My strength is not in my fragile body. It is in my desire to be other, passing in the world of men. I play against my female self.

I play despite my small size, my fine skin. I play in the rain storms. I'm not afraid of the sky's might flooding the gardens and Hydra Plaza. The gaze of the men of Zeralda gives me courage, allows transgression—in spite of other people's words, small scars forever etched in my flesh.

My clothes. My appearance. My running. My endurance is a kind of madness. My voice. My soaked hair. My bloody legs. My flight. My discarded identity.

The indulgent gaze of the men of Zeralda stops the rumblings.

I watch the boys in the street after school, playing with the new-found sun. It sparkles. How they mirror my rage. I can't get out of the car. They fall and knock each other over. They dribble the ball between the trolley cars, playing with death. They're not afraid of anything. My hand on the window begs to play. My gaze will always be full of envy. They are my age. They have my skin. They have my hair.

I don't understand all their words. "Yahya Algeria"⁴ is constantly repeated. I repeat it in front of the mirror in the long hallway that separates the bedrooms. I hear the crowd's voice, singular, like an invocation. *Yahya Algeria*. I'm as one with those children.

I play inside my prison. I become Dahleb, the soccer player who signs his photograph, "To little Nina, with all my affection." The affection of the men of Zeralda returns to me, and the tenderness of Amine's eyes that look without saying a word. Silence is agreement.

So, I become his double. I leave his shadow, taking his strength. I will always protect Amine. The earth that bears us is my witness.



I go to the French school. I go to the French high school. I go to the Alliance française. I go to the French Cultural Center. France is still here in Algeria, projected, diminished, and marginal.

4. Long live Algeria!

I speak French. I hear Arabic. My summer vacations are French. I am on Algerian land. I run on Algerian sand. I hear my Algerian father's voice. I am with the multiracial children. Being together, we understand each other.

I am not very familiar with Algerian families; still, I turn down French families' invitations. The way they look at me. Their words. Their judgments. Their French Algeria. Arabic words infiltrate my native language, incursions. I end my sentences with *hachma*.⁵

I have two passports. Yet I have only one visible face.

Algerians don't see me. French people don't understand. I build walls that separate me from other people. Others. Their lips and their eyes search my body for a trace of my mother, a sign of my father. "She has Maryvonne's smile." "She has Rachid's gestures." Forever split between this one and that one, enduring a fractured identity, seeing myself as divided. Who do I look like the most? Who has conquered me? Who has won over my voice? My face? My body in motion? France or Algeria?

I will always have to explain and justify myself. These eyes will follow me for a long time. They'll feed the fear of the other, this foreigner. Only writing will protect me from the world.



Who will I be in France? Where will I go? How will the French see me? To be French means being without my father, without his strength, his eyes, his guiding hands. To be Algerian means being without my mother, without her face, her voice, her protective hands. Who am I? Amine will choose at eighteen. He will choose his camp. He will become whole. He will defend only one country.⁶ He will finally know. As for me, I am both horribly free and restrained.

"You're not French." "You're not Algerian."

5. Shame.

6. As a male citizen of both countries, at eighteen Amine will have to choose whether he will do his military service in France or in Algeria.—Translators

I am everything. I am nothing. My skin. My eyes. My voice. My body closes in on itself twice over.

I stay with my mother. I stay with my father. I take from both. I lose from both. Each part merges with the other only to separate again. Each part kisses and quarrels. It's a war. It's a marriage. It's a rejection. It's a seduction. I don't choose. I leave and I return. My body is born of two exiles. I travel inside myself. I run, immobile. My nights are Algerian. My memory brings back the faces that shape my own. My days are French: elementary school, high school, the French language we speak. Amine speaks of France, the other country, the one that he longs for in its absence.



Amine raises his voice over the sound of the waves that flood the Sidi-Ferruch dike. He tells stories of a land beyond the black stones of the Algerian reef. He talks about France and the other childhood, about his French life. He searches for words, calls out, but can no longer remember. Other voices contradict his: the voices of the sea, the wind, and the birds. He wrestles against the strength of the surrounding land. First it's a struggle, then a protest. He unearths his other face, my foreigner. We walk on the dike, against the violence of the sea and the wind that dictates its movements. We are between France and Algeria, captured by the Southern winter, a false season. Here, the sun is eternal. I no longer hear Amine or no longer want to hear him. His dream. His desire. He is already elsewhere, without me. His French life requires my absence.

My life finds its pulse here. It is made of the sea, the earth, and the domed houses of Sidi-Ferruch. I know Algeria, her cycles. France is a kind of violence. It will snatch me from Algiers. I am different from Amine. I know our places: Cherchell, Tipaza, Boufarik. Treasured places. I learn to assimilate, to be less conflicted. France is outside of me. I run away. I always return to Algeria. I know this place, its Roman ruins. My solitude is here, with these stones. France remains

white and impossible. It witnessed my birth and my departure. A rejection. I am reborn in an apartment in Algiers, the Gulf,⁷ September 1967. This is where I invent myself. It is here that I create my face, my eyes, my voice. Everything is done here, in the midst of my Algerian solitude. I will always be from here, shaped by the lessons I learned in the Algeria of the 1970s.

Our mothers are in the streets of Sidi-Ferruch, their hands protecting their faces from the wind. They bow with the gusts of salt and sand. The violence of the sea is all that exists, a battle. Fragile bodies against the sound of the waves. Amine is gone. They do not notice. Amine gets lost. They could care less about Amine's disavowal, his separation from Algeria, his desire, my madness.

Amine is attracted by the dark blue waves. Amine is split and pulled by that other country. Amine celebrates his victory over me. I am abandoned. I run toward my mother. She holds my shoulders. We struggle against the wind. My mother draws me to her waist. She heals everything. I close my eyes. Amine is here. Filled with despair, his body is in Algeria.

The wind ceases. The waves die down. Silence overtakes the place. It resembles death. We go back to Algiers. The car follows the edge of the rocks. The sea, its dunes, its reeds, and its reefs lead to the city. The sea disappears as the first villages appear. Koléa. Boufarik. Douéra. Flags. Alleys of plane trees. Inflatable mattresses, beach balls, and flotation devices.

A child is playing alone. Men are leaning against the city's walls. Boredom settles in. Women are hidden. Desire. This is Algeria, Amine, its fragility. The siren of the freighters reminds us of the sea, of its intoxicating smell. Amine is leaning against the car door. He is thinking about the elusive sea, a shadow in the night. He is voiceless. I know his sadness. I know his inscrutable face.

We will never be like everyone else.



7. Neighborhood in Algiers.

I become Algerian through my father, his protective hand in my hand, his hair, his eyes, his brown skin, and his voice. I become Algerian through his Arabic tongue, his prayers, his parents inhabiting his body like occupiers. I get in his car with delight. I watch the street, his neck, the buses, his shoulders, the children, his hands always slow and supple. I accompany him to Hydra Plaza. We get out of the car. I hold onto his arm, a concrete anchor. I walk with my legs wide open. I am with my father. I believe I am becoming Algerian. I am saved.

My father initiates me into childhood. He raises me as a boy, his pride. Grace of a girl, agility of a boy. I have his will, he says. He teaches me how to play soccer, volleyball, how to swim the crawl, how to dive from the brown, shiny rocks, just like the hoodlums.

He gives me strength. He molds my body. He teaches me to defend myself in the country of men. To run. To jump. To run away. He wards off my fragility. He calls me Brio. I'm not sure why. I like this name; it draws out my silhouette and physical traits. Brio stretches out my muscles. Brio is the light on my face. Brio is my will to live. The men of Hydra Plaza. Their hands in my hair. Rachid's son or daughter? His eyes, his skin, his narrow shoulders. His girl. Their fingers pinch my cheeks, their smell reaches my nose. Here, I am protected by their words, their slow gestures, their attitudes, their faces. Later I will mimic them. Here, I notice and learn. Here, I share in the secret of the men of Algiers.



I organize my life secretly. I become my true self in my room. It's the place where I can mimic to my heart's content. I conjure up reality, then modify it. I walk in circles. I am looking for someone else. I stand for a while in front of my open window looking onto the Mitidja plains. I count the electrical poles that mark the hillsides. I count the red balls delicately strung on the taut cables. The wind makes the cables vibrate. The runway lights shine at night as a warning to airplanes. This vibrato. These lights. This is Algeria

at night. A night without silence. A frightening night.

The sea is literally on the other side of the apartment. It is blue in the winter and white in the summer. Black freighters go across it. The sea is violent. Its beaches are tucked away, invisible from here. The Bay of Algiers forms a ridge. It's a defense against the sea. It's a wall that wards off invasion. It is city life, packed, noisy, and organized. It's not my life.

Only the large chimney of the Telemlı factory stands out from the terraces. It pierces the sky. The sea is behind the eucalyptus grove. I am always looking beyond. Beyond the Mitidja plains. Beyond the trees. Beyond my female body. Beyond the sea is France, my native and neglected homeland. The sea is cradled by two continents. I remain between these two countries. I am between two identities. My equilibrium lies in my solitude, a unifying force. I invent another world, without a voice, without judgment. I dance for hours. A trance followed by silence. I learn to write.



The sand of Zeralda Beach is ashen, burnt by the sun. The sea retreats. It is bottomless. It becomes unfit for swimming. It heads for foreign shores, abandoning us. The beach is immense. Frequently deserted, it magnifies solitude. The solitude of swimmers, of Amine's mother, of my listless body. I only have the sea, the sand, the vista of distant reefs, the movement of clouds, the sky, my own vertigo. I only have nature, through which I become adult and learn about desire. I am attracted to her.

I came with Farid M. to this very place on a field trip. I held his hand for a long time. I refrained from swimming. In the heat, in the din of the surf, in the violence of the Algerian summer. I came to Zeralda Beach without Amine. I became a girl here, by Farid M.'s presence. I recognized my face in his eyes. I heard my voice in his slow, secretive voice.

Amine's mother, with her white skin and her face, confronts the sun. It's a war. She is powerless here, on the Algerian beach. She

only hears the sea, her escape. She is crushed by Algeria. More than a foreigner, she's a French woman. She says nothing. She can't tolerate the sun. She covers her legs. The heat. A bite. She is looking for her place here in Zeralda, yet she remains on the outside. She's a child without a country.

The sun burns Zeralda, the sea, and my tanned body. The sun burns the white skin of the French woman. It falls on bodies, muffles voices. We can't hear each other. I return to Amine, my sad friend. He runs off and comes back. He is running away from his mother and from the earth. Algeria is his prison. I envy his body. I want his long muscles, his precociously adult face, his rough hands, his shoulders, and his curly black hair.

I am too small for my age.

The beach is impossible. It suffocates. It isolates. Amine's mother is not with us. She is not watching. She is obsessed with the sun. It targets her body, consuming everything. It announces the imminent danger of this country. The sun is violent. It burns the salt and kindles, heating up the stones on the cliffs. Its light is white. Its rays are powerful.

The sun is madness. The sun is a man who devours Algeria. We run away from the beach and the doomed body of Amine's mother. We leave the blaze. We are headed to Zeralda's hotel. We climb a wall. We cross the gardens with dirt under our bare feet, brambles poking our thighs, and reeds slashing our skin. The silence returns, spreading beyond the white archways. It enters the mosaic walls. It permeates the deserted hotel. It lurks beneath the blue water of the pool. It is present in our boredom.

The sun reaches Zeralda's hotel. I jump off the diving board. I go down, deep, and I stay at the bottom for a long time. The sun scorches like fire against my breath, against my will. It is waiting for me. I don't resurface. The sun uncovers the truth: I am not Algerian. The sun burns the row of pine trees. It is looking for me. It is coming. Its oblique rays consume me. The sun is a kind of vengeance. I am not from here. I will not resurface. I remain seated at

the bottom of the pool. I am underneath Zeralda. I am underneath the earth to drown my boredom, the face of Amine's mother, the solitude of our abandoned bodies, and my Algerian life. The pool is deep. I hear my voice in my throat. I hear my own blood. To drown in Algeria. To conquer the sun and to stay here. Never to return to France. Amine descends into the pool. His eyes are open. I see his face, his beautiful face. Amine has his father's face. He grips my shoulders. He alone knows; he knows the force of the sun and my fragility. He lifts me up. His belly against mine. My head on his chest. Amine is no longer a child. Slowly, we resurface. We will remain haunted by the secret of the pool.



I am a foreigner here; I am nothing. France forgets me while Algeria doesn't know who I am. Here, identity is molded. It is dual and broken. Here, I avoid the children's gaze. I don't understand the language.

Two bastards on the beach. Two mixed-race children. Amine and I. Me and Amine. Attracted to each other. Sitting side by side. Cuddled up in the water, forever. Difficult children, as the women say.

Here, I look for my land, and I search for my face. I remain outside of Algeria. I am inadmissible. Here, I hate France. Here, I know hatred. Here, I am the French woman's daughter. The child of the Roumia.⁸ Here, I bear in me Algeria's War of Independence. I dream of being an Arab in honor of my Algerian grandmother, Rabiâ Bouraoui. In memory of her hand on my forehead, her belly, her blood, her language that I don't understand, her tenderness, and her son, Amar, who was killed during the war.

Here, I carry the wound of my Algerian family.

I keep Amar's photograph, my secret. It's his last photograph, shot on the battlefield. Dressed in military uniform, he is cocking a

8. Roumia derives from the term Roumi, which is used by Muslims to designate Christians.—Translators