
This Blinding Absence of Light

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There were twenty-three of us in Cell Block B, each in a separate cell. Besides the hole in the ground that served as a toilet, there was another opening, over the iron door, to let in air. We had no names anymore, no past, no future. Stripped of everything, we had kept only our skins and our heads. Well, not all of us had. Number 12 was the first to lose his reason. He quickly became apathetic. He was way ahead of the rest of us. He entered the house of pain and sorrow by leaving his mind – or what remained of it – at the prison gates. Some claimed they had seen him go through the motions of unscrewing his head and bending down to bury it under two big stones. Admission free, in his case. Nothing got through to him. He talked to himself, nonstop. Even asleep, he kept jabbering incomprehensible words.

Defying explicit orders, we insisted on calling one another only by our given and family names. Number 12's name was Hamid. He was thin and quite tall, with a pasty complexion. His father was an adjutant who had lost an arm in Indochina; the army had undertaken to educate his children, who all became soldiers. Hamid wanted to be an airline pilot and dreamed of leaving the army.

During the day it was impossible to make him be quiet. His delirium reassured us a little: we were still capable of reacting, of wanting to hear words that made sense, that would make us think, smile, or even hope. We knew that Hamid had gone away. He had left us. He neither saw nor heard us anymore. He stared at the ceiling while he talked. In a sense, Hamid was our probable future, even though we had been told over and over that we no longer had a future. Perhaps the doctors had driven him crazy with drugs as an example of what could happen to us. That was not impossible, because during the months spent underground enduring all kinds of torture, some of us lost our lives, and others, like Hamid, our minds.

His voice echoed through the darkness. Now and then we would recognize a word or even a sentence: panther; pot and pothered; possible; poplin; pushcart; pickiness; pery pick; pie of punger and pirst... It was a letter P day.

The guards let him talk, counting on our exasperation to make his presence even more distressing. To foil their game, Gharbi, Number 10, began to recite the Koran, which he knew by heart. He had studied in Koranic school, as had most of us, except that he had intended to become the barracks mufti. He had even entered a recitation

contest and won third prize. He was a good Muslim, never missed his prayers, and always said a few verses before going to sleep. At officers' training school, they called him the Ustad, the Master.

When the Ustad began to recite the Koran, Hamid's voice grew softer, softer, until it died away. It was as if the verses of the holy book soothed him, or at least suspended his delirium. The moment the Ustad finished saying the set phrase, "Thus the word of God the Ail-Powerful is Truth," Hamid began to babble with the same intensity, the same maddening rhythm, the same confusion. No one dared interrupt him. He needed to spout all those words in French and Arabic. It was his way of leaving us, of isolating himself and summoning death, which came for him when he went into a trance and bashed his head against the wall several times. He gave a long cry; then his voice and breath were forever stilled. The Ustad spoke the first sura of the Koran. Sang it, rather. It was beautiful. The silence that fell afterward was magnificent.