

Translated from the French by Charlotte Mandell  
With an Introduction by Brian Evenson

Mathias Énard

# ZONE

"The novel of the decade, if not of the century."—Christophe Claro

## Praise for *Zone*

“The novel of the decade, if not of the century.”

—Christophe Claro

“A modern *Iliad*. . . . You turn the pages as if it were a great thriller. . . . A great novel. You must read it!”

—François Busnel, TV5, France

“*Zone* is a major and compelling work, a work that will keep you in its grip from its first utterance to its last.”

—Brian Evenson

“A powerful read, a novel for the ages.”

—François Monti, *Quarterly Conversation*

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 **OPEN LETTER**  
LITERARY TRANSLATIONS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER

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*To the world of A's*

## Introduction

I first learned about *Zone* in September of 2008 when I was in France for a literary festival. Looking for something new to read, each time I'd meet with a journalist or reviewer, I'd ask what they'd read recently that they'd liked. The book that came up most often, and most enthusiastically, was one published just a few weeks earlier, Mathias Énard's *Zone*.

On first glance, *Zone* seems an unlikely choice for best-loved novel, even among critics. Not only is it not a plot-driven book, it's a book that takes place entirely during a train journey from Milan to Rome. In one sense, very little actually happens: a man boards a train on his way to Rome after having a deranged individual hold out his hand to him and say "comrade one last handshake before the end of the world." Shaken, he proceeds on to Rome. While in transit, he smokes in the bathroom, he goes to the bar and has several drinks, he watches people get on and off the train, he dozes a little. But, most of all, he thinks, turning over and over in his head the details of his own life as well as very specific and often very troubling obscurities from the wars and conflicts of the twentieth century. This, in fact, is where the action and the tension of the book lie: within a single human skull. The man is, we quickly learn, an amateur historian of atrocity—or, rather, someone able to pass as an amateur historian. In actuality he is an ex-soldier from the Balkans, where he both witnessed and participated in atrocity, and a spy for the French intelligence service. Or, as he phrases it, a "warrior, spy, archeologist of madness, lost now with an assumed name between Milan and Rome, in the company of living ghosts . . ." He is bringing to Rome a briefcase full of secrets that he intends to sell and, afterward, to abandon his real identity for good. Along the way, his mind will touch on Ezra Pound and Dalton Trumbo, Eduardo Rózsa and the song "My Way" (in multilingual versions), the Spanish fascist Millán-Astray and the autoerotic asphixiator William Burroughs, the Armenian genocide and the crimes of Croat terrorists, the Black Hand and the Holocaust, on girlfriends and comrades he left behind. Indeed, his time on the train is the moment in which Francis Servain Mirković, exhausted and drunk and a little frantic, begins to take all the different things that have led him to this moment and synthesize them in a way that is at once brilliant and terrifyingly disturbing.

The swirl of information, the confusion of Francis's own mind, is augmented by the way the novel represents his thoughts; *Zone*, 517 pages long, is written as a single run-on sentence in which everything is allowed to jostle up against everything else. Énard does show a little mercy: this sentence is broken up into twenty-four chapters (not coincidentally the same number as in *The Iliad*—"I wanted to do a contemporary epic," Énard told Robert Solé in *Le Monde des Livres*) and in addition is disrupted three times by excerpts from a Lebanese book that Francis is reading. But what's remarkable is how quickly a reader's mind can adapt to this, how the rhythms of Énard's text and his sometimes slightly eccentric use of commas end up carrying one

swiftly forward. There's a remarkable flow and rhythm to the sentences, partly imitating the rocking rhythm of a train, which almost allows you to forget that you're reading a book that's a single sentence long. *Zone* rarely if ever feels artificial; its form, as Beckett suggests of Joyce's "Anna Livia Plurabel," is its content, its content its form: "His writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself.*" (Beckett, "Dante . . . Bruno . Vico . . . Joyce").

*Zone* owes something to Michel Butor's *La Modification* (1957), a novel in which a man takes a train from Paris to Rome to unexpectedly visit his lover, intending to inform her that he is leaving his wife for her but changing his mind along the way. Like *Zone*, the frame of the story proper is the train ride, though the nature of each narrator's thoughts are rather different. In addition, Butor writes in second person using standard punctuation and paragraphing. One might think as well, in passing, of other *nouveau romanists* such as Claude Simon (for the non-paragraphing he uses in *Conducting Bodies*, not dissimilar to Énard's own non-paragraphing) or Alain Robbe-Grillet (because of his interest in detectives and spies and because of the importance of a train journey in *La Reprise*). Yet at the same time it would be as appropriate to mention either Samuel Beckett's trilogy or Thomas Bernhard's *Gargoyles* in the place of Simon, or Javier Marías's *Your Face Tomorrow* in the place of Robbe-Grillet. Not to mention Patrik Ouředník's *Europeana*. Or countless other books. Indeed, *Zone* is a book aware of, and carrying on a conversation with, many different literary traditions.

On a political level, *Zone* is engaged but very far from being partisan—it's a very different book from, say, Peter Handke's polemical *A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia*. Francis is neither wholly reliable nor wholly unreliable, and it is difficult for the reader to ever feel fully at ease with him. He is implicated and not particularly trying to hide it, but he can reveal himself only gradually, only slowly, as a way of trying to free himself from himself so that he can start over. In his mind, the line between victim and murderer comes to seem as confused and arbitrary as the lines we draw between nations and then fight to the death to protect. For him "there are lots of innocent men among the killers in the suitcase, as many as there are among the victims, murderers rapists throat-slitters ritual decapitators . . ." Strains of innocence and guilt run through both sides. Someone's views can shift as easily as a gun can be aimed, and individuals begin to fall into roles out of fear or hate, almost against their will. This is a book about trying—and probably failing—to escape the aftershocks of one's own trauma, about trying to shake one's ghosts.

Indeed, for me, *Zone* is ultimately a book about collective and individual trauma, the way trauma bleeds its way up and down between the individual and the larger collective groups to which he belongs. It is at once about bad faith and about the absurdity that terms such as bad faith take on in the face of decapitation, atrocity, and overwhelming fear. A little push, almost nothing—a bullet that breaks one's car window, say—may well be enough to tilt the scales and make one begin to become inhuman.

After its publication *Zone* went on to win several major prizes, including the *Prix du Livre Inter*, the *Prix Décembre* (whose other recipients include such greats as Pierre Guyotat, Pierre Michon, and Jean-Philippe Toussaint), and the *Prix Initiales*, and to be a finalist for several others. "What is amazing in this horrible and sublime book," Anne Brigaudeau suggests, "is the magnificent use of language, an uncommon

erudition, a meticulous know-how for narrating the worst atrocities of the century, down to little known or forgotten details.” Does *Zone* live up to such praise? I think it does. It is a profoundly (and complexly) ethical book, satisfying both as a work of prose and in its incisive interpretation of our times. *Zone* is a major and compelling work, a work that will keep you in its grip from its first utterance to its last.

*Brian Evenson*  
2010

**ZONE**

## **Milestones**

Milan

Lodi

Parma

Reggio Emilia

Modena

Bologna

Prato

Florence

Rome

*And then went down to the ship,  
Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea, and  
We set up mast and sail on that swart ship,  
Board sheep aboard her, and our bodies also  
—Ezra Pound*

*Jerusalem and I are like a blind man and a cripple:  
She sees for me  
As far as the Dead Sea, as far as the end of days.  
I carry her on my shoulders  
And, under her, I walk in the shadows.  
—Yehuda Amichai*

# I

everything is harder once you reach man's estate, everything rings falser a little metallic like the sound of two bronze weapons clashing they make you come back to yourself without letting you get out of anything it's a fine prison, you travel with a lot of things, a child you didn't bear a little Czech crystal star a talisman beside the snow you watch melting, after the re-routing of the Gulf Stream prelude to the Ice Age, stalactites in Rome and icebergs in Egypt, it keeps raining in Milan I missed my plane I had 1,500 kilometers on the train ahead of me now I have six hundred still to go, this morning the Alps sparkled like knives, I was trembling with exhaustion in my seat couldn't close my eyes like an aching drug addict, I talked to myself out loud on the train, or under my breath, I feel very old I want the train to go on go on let it go to Istanbul or Syracuse let it go to the end at least let it know how to go to the end of the journey I thought oh I should be pitied I took pity on myself on that train its rhythm opens your soul more deftly than a scalpel, I let everything flow by everything flees everything is more difficult these days along rail lines I'd like to let myself be led simply from one place to another as is logical for a passenger like a blind man led by the arm when he crosses a dangerous street but I'm just going from Paris to Rome, and to the main train station in Milan, to that Temple of Akhenaton for locomotives where a few traces of snow remain despite the rain I turn round and round, I look at the immense Egyptian columns supporting the ceiling, I have a little drink out of boredom, at a café overlooking the tracks the way others overlook the sea, it doesn't do me any good it wasn't the time for libations there are so many things that divert you from the path, that lead you astray and alcohol is one of them it makes the wounds deeper when you find yourself alone in an immense freezing train station obsessed by a destination that is in front of you and behind you at the same time: but a train isn't circular, it goes from one point to another whereas I am in orbit I gravitate like a chunk of rock, I felt like a measly pebble when the man approached me on the platform, I know I attract madmen and deranged people these days they rush into my fragility they find a mirror for themselves or a companion in arms and that is truly crazy, priest of an unknown divinity he has an impish cap and a small bell in his left hand, he holds out his right hand and shouts in Italian "comrade one last handshake before the end of the world" I don't dare shake it afraid he's right, he must be forty, no older, and he has that keen prying gaze of fanatics who ask you questions because they've just discovered an instant brother in you, I hesitate before the outstretched arm terrified by that screwy smile and I answer "no thanks" as if he were selling me a newspaper or offering me a smoke, then the madman rings his bell and begins laughing in a big doleful voice and pointing at me with the hand he offered me, then he spits on the ground, moves away and an immense almost desperate solitude sweeps the platform at that moment I would give anything for arms or shoulders even the train taking me to Rome I would give up everything for someone to appear there and stand in the middle

of the station, among the shadows, among the men without men the travelers clinging to their telephones and their suitcases, all these people about to disappear and give up their bodies during the brief digression that will take them from Milano Centrale to Fossoli Bolzano or Trieste, a long time ago at the Gare de Lyon a deranged mystic had also announced the end of the world to me and he was right, I had been split in two then in the war and crushed like a tiny meteor, the kind that have stopped shining in the sky, a natural bombshell whose mass according to astronomers is laughable, the madman in the Milan station reminds me of the gentle screwball in the Gare de Lyon, a saint, who knows, maybe it was the same man, maybe we grew at the same rhythm each on his own side in our respective madresses and find each other on platform number 14 in the train station in Milan, a city with the predatory Spanish military name, perched on the edge of the plain like a glacial crust slowly vomited by the Alps whose peaks I saw, flint blades ripping the sky and setting the tone of the apocalypse confirmed by the demon with the bell in that sanctuary of progress that is the Stazione di Milano Centrale lost in time like me here lost in space in the elegant city, with a patch on my eye like Millán-Astray the one-eyed general, a bird of prey, feverish, ready to rip vibrant flesh to shreds as soon as the light of flight and danger is found again: Millán-Astray would so have liked Madrid to become a new Rome, he served the Iberian Franco Il Duce his bald idol in that great warring prelude to the 1940s, that one-eyed belligerent officer was a legionnaire he shouted *viva la muerte* a good military prophet, and he was right, the fugue of death would be played as far as Poland, would raise a tall wave of corpses whose foam would end up licking the shores of the Adriatic, in Trieste or in Croatia: I think about Millán-Astray and his argument with Unamuno strict high priest of culture while travelers hurry to the platform to take off for the end of the world and the train leading them straight there, Unamuno was such a classical and noble philosopher that he didn't see the massacre on its way, he couldn't admit that the one-eyed general was right when he shouted *long live death* in front of his flock for that hawk had sensed (animals tremble before the storm) that the carrion would increase and multiply, that death would enjoy years of plenty, before also ending up in a train, a train between Bolzano and Birkenau, between Trieste and Klagenfurt or between Zagreb and Rome, where time stopped, as it stopped for me on that platform lined with railway cars, furious, panting engines, a pause between two deaths, between the Spanish soldier and the train station with a similar name, as crushing as Ares god of war himself—I light a last cigarette mechanically I have to get ready for the journey, for moving like all the people pacing up and down the platform in Milano Centrale in search of a love, a gaze, an event that will tear them from the endless circling, from the Wheel, a meeting, anything to escape yourself, or vital business, or the memory of emotions and crimes, it is strange that there are no women on the platform at this precise moment, motivated by the memory of Millán-Astray and his bandaged eye I climb into the trans-Italian express that must have been the zenith of progress and technology ten years ago for its doors were automatic and it went faster than 200 kilometers per hour in a straight line on a good day and today, a little closer to the end of the world, it's just a train: the same goes for all things like trains and cars, embraces, faces, bodies their speed their beauty or their ugliness seems ridiculous a few years later, once they're putrid or rusty, once up the step now I'm in a different world, plush velour thickens everything, heat too, I

left winter by getting into this train car, it's a journey in time, it's a day unlike the others, it's a special day December 8<sup>th</sup> the day of the Immaculate Conception and I am missing the Pope's homily on the Piazza di Spagna as a madman comes and announces the end of the world to me, I could have seen the pontiff one last time, seen the spiritual descendant of the first Palestinian leader the only one who got some results, but it wasn't easy for that skinny whining Levantine who didn't write a single line during his lifetime, outside on the next track a train is stopping and a pretty girl behind the window has intriguing eyes, I think she's talking to someone I don't see, she is very close to me actually a meter away at most we are separated by two dirtyish windows I have to be strong I can't linger over the faces of young women I have to be resolute so I can gather momentum for the kilometers ahead of me then for the void and the terror of the world I'm changing my life my profession better not think about it, I placed the little suitcase over my seat and I discreetly handcuffed it to the luggage rack better close my eyes for a minute but on the platform policemen mounted on two-wheeled electric chariots like Achilles or Hector without a horse are chasing a young black man who's running towards the tracks rousing surprise and concern among the travelers, blue angels, announcers of the Apocalypse maybe, astride a strange silent azure scooter, everyone gets out to take in the scene, Pallas Athena and the son of Tydeus rushing at the Trojans, a few dozen meters away from me one of the two policemen reaches the fugitive and with a gesture of rare violence aided by all the speed of his vehicle he hurls the man at bay up against one of the cement posts in the middle of the platform, the captive flattens against the concrete his head bangs into the column and he falls, he falls on his stomach right in the middle of the Milano Centrale station just in time for the second angel to jump on his back and immobilize him, sitting on his lower back the way a farmer or a wrangler ties up a fractious animal, then, back on his machine, he drags the criminal stumbling at the end of a chain to the admiring murmurs of the crowd, ancient scene of triumph, they parade the chained conquered ones behind the chariots of the conquerors, they drag them to the gaping galleys, the black man has a swollen face and a bloody nose his head held high a little incredulous everyone gets back into the car the incident is over justice has triumphed just a few minutes before departure, I glance at the suitcase, I'm afraid I won't manage to sleep or I'll be pursued as soon as I doze as soon as I lower my guard they'll interfere with my sleep or get under my eyelids to raise them the way you open shutters or Venetian blinds, it's been a long time since I thought of Venice, the green water by the Dogana, the fog of the Zattere and the intense cold when you look at the cemetery from the Fondamente Nuove, back from the war, hadn't thought of the shadows, in Venice they're made of wine and drunk in the winter starting at five o'clock in the evening, I see again the Slavic violinists who played for the Japanese, the French in full carnival masquerade, a rich hairdresser from Munich who bought himself a palace on the Grand Canal, and the train suddenly gets underway I lean my head back we're off over 550 kilometers till the end of the world

## II

I let myself fall under the spell of the flat cadence of the suburbs of that city with the name of the predatory Spanish soldier, outskirts of a Northern city like so many others, buildings to cram the proletariat in, immigrants from the 1960s, vertical concentration camps, to the paradoxical rhythm of the cross-ties—I am in Venice in that tiny damp apartment where the only light was in the kitchen the floor was sloping, you slept with your feet in the air which apparently is good for the circulation, it was at the entrance to the Ghetto opposite the bakery in front of the big synagogue where I sometimes heard psalms and songs, sometimes the name of the neighborhood made me afraid, the Old Ghetto, especially at night when everything was deserted and silent, when the *bora* blew the icy wind that seemed to come straight from the Ukraine after freezing the Czechs the Hungarians and the Austrians, in my Old Ghetto it was impossible not to think of Łódź of Cracow of Salonika and of other ghettos of which nothing remains, impossible not to be pursued by the winter of 1942, the trains to Treblinka, Bełżec, and Sobibor, in 1993 a few months after my own war and exactly fifty years after the extermination, in the Venetian Ghetto shrouded in fog and cold I imagined the German death machine not realizing that one of its last cogs had turned right nearby, a few kilometers away, but if I am thinking now again of Venice in a railway torpor it's mostly because of the one who had joined me there, the body she so often refused me forced me into long nocturnal walks sometimes until dawn, with my black cap, I passed the Square of the Two Moors, I greeted Saint Christopher on top of the Madonna dell'Orto, I got lost among the few modern buildings that they have over there as if they had been purposefully hidden in secret recesses, as if they weren't hidden enough by the lagoon, and how many times have I found myself back again having a coffee at daybreak with the pilots and skippers of the vaporetta I didn't exist for them, Venetians have that atavistic ability to ignore anything that isn't them, not to see, to make the foreigner disappear, and this sovereign scorn, this bizarre superannuated grandeur of a recipient that lets him completely ignore the hand that feeds him was not unpleasant, on the contrary, it was a great frankness and a great freedom, far from the commercial chumminess that has invaded the whole world, the whole world except Venice where they keep ignoring you and scorning you as if they didn't need you at all, as if the restaurant owner had no need of customers, rich as he is with his whole city and sure, certain, that other more easily pleased guests will soon come to fill his tables, whatever happens, and that gives him a formidable superiority over the visitor, the superiority of the vulture over its carrion, the tourist will always end up fleeced, dismembered with or without a smile, what's the use of lying to him, even the baker across from my apartment admitted, without blinking an eye, that his bread wasn't very good and his pastries overpriced, this baker saw me every day every day for months without ever smiling at me his strength was his certainty of my disappearance, one day I would leave Venice and the lagoon, whether it was after one,

two, three, or ten years he belonged to the island and not me, and he reminded me of this every morning, which was salutary, no delusions to maintain, I associated only with foreigners, Slavs, Palestinians, Lebanese, Ghassan, Nayef, Khalil, and even a Syrian from Damascus who ran a bar where students and exiles gathered, he was a former sailor who had jumped ship during a stopover, a rough guy you'd never associate with any sea or any boat, he had a sturdy landlubber's head with very big ears that I remember as being on the hairy side, he was very pious, he prayed, fasted, and never drank the alcohol he served to his customers, his weakness was girls, whores especially, which he justified by saying that the Prophet had had a hundred wives, that he loved women, and that in short fornication was a fine sin, in Venice I didn't fornicate much, the winter was endless, damp and cold, hardly favorable to fornication in fact, I remember that the first night in the Ghetto I had no blankets and I was so frozen I rolled myself up in a dusty oriental rug, fully dressed, with my shoes on because the rigid carpet was like a tube and didn't cover my feet, I read some stories about phantom boats by William Hope Hodgson before falling asleep like a failed fakir or a dead sailor ready to be returned to the sea sewn up in his hammock, far from the eroticism that some attribute to Venice, a guy rolled up like a dusty threadbare cigar, on his own bed, with his shoes and a hat, why wasn't the heat working, I am incapable of remembering in any case in this train now it must be about 75 degrees, I took my sweater off at the same moment as my neighbor opposite, he looks like a white New York rapper, he is reading *Pronto* with a superior air, I wonder what it is going to announce, certainly not the end of the world, probably the end of a couple of Hollywood actors or the cocaine overdose of a thirty-year-old Italian businessman, the nephew or grandson of Agnelli the Fiat mastermind, I manage to read his first name on the cover, Lupo, that's strange, I must be mistaken, how can one be a businessman and be called Wolf, I picture him handsome, his hair shiny, his teeth white, his eye keen and just slightly bloodshot, they probably found him unconscious in a luxury apartment in Turin, maybe in the company of some classy escort, his Lamborghini nicely parked down below, with who knows a little blood or bile on his unbuttoned Armani shirt, and I picture the agitation of the women in the lobby who are mostly the ones who read these papers, my God this wolf is so handsome, so rich and well-born, what a waste, he could have had the decency to crash into a security gate at 300 kilometers an hour, a helicopter or even a jet-ski accident, end up cut to little pieces by one of the propellers of his own yacht, even shot in the face by a jealous husband or a Mafia hit man but drugs, drugs, it's as if he had caught smallpox, it's a shame, it's not possible, unfair, for a little while he seems almost pitiable this young Turin wolf who is plunging his great family into scandal, I hope he'll get out of the hospital before the end of the world, my neighbor looks condescending and disapproving, he shakes his head emitting little noises with his tongue as night falls outside, we are in the plains, the sad plains of Lombardy the darkness is invading thank God the twilight will be brief the bare frozen trees standing next to the electric lines will disappear soon you'll be able to make out nothing but their shadows and the moon might emerge from the clouds from time to time to illumine the hills before Bologna, then we'll glide towards the southwest in the Tuscan softness to Florence and finally in the same direction to Rome, still almost five hours before the Termini station, the churches, the Pope and the whole kit, the Roman caboodle: religious

trinkets and ties, censors and umbrellas, all lost among the Bernini fountains and the cars, there where, on the stinking streets and the putrid Tiber, float Virgins with Child, the Saints Matthew, the Pietàs, the Depositions from the Cross, the mausoleums, the columns, the policemen, the ministers, the emperors, and the noise of a city resurrected a thousand times, gnawed by gangrene beauty and rain, which rather than some beautiful woman evokes an old scholar with superb knowledge who forgets himself in his armchair, life is leaving him in every way possible, he trembles, coughs, recites the *Georgics* or an ode by Horace as he pisses himself, the center of Rome empties itself in the same way, no more inhabitants, no more eating places, clothes clothes and clothes enough to make you lose your head billions of shirts hundreds of thousands of shoes millions of ties of scarves enough to cover Saint Peter, to circle the Coliseum, to bury everything beneath endless gear, and let the tourists make the tour of the antique shops in this immense religious secondhand store where gazes greedy for discoveries shine, look, I found a magnificent Borromini church under this fur coat, a ceiling by the Carracci brothers behind this hunting jacket and in this black leather boot the horns of Michelangelo's *Moses*, if they weren't waiting for me I'd never go back there, if in man's estate everything were simpler I'd never have made this journey, never have carried this last suitcase, *better my Gallic Loire than the Latin Tiber*, Du Bellay's verses learned by heart in high school, *happy who like Ulysses* and so on, I too have my *Regrets*, Ungaretti said that the Tiber was a deadly river, Ungaretti born in Alexandria in Egypt lived there until he was twenty before setting off for Rome then settling in France, there is an Alexandria in the Piedmont not very far from here, I've never been there, I remember in Venice I had asked in a travel agency if there were any boats to Alexandria and the employee (a blonde Venetian, a kind of barrette held in her mouth like a toothpick) had looked at me stunned, to Alexandria but there's a train, and in that immediate confidence one has in professionals I had pictured, for a second, a train that would go from Venice to Alexandria in Egypt, direct via Trieste Zagreb Belgrade Thessalonica Istanbul Antioch Aleppo Beirut Acre and Port Said, a challenge to geopolitics and to the mind, and even, once I had understood her confusion, Alessandria in Piedmont, I began to dream of a train that would unite all the Alexandrias, a network connecting Alessandria in Piedmont Alexandria Troas in Turkey Alexandria in Egypt Alexandria in Arachosia, possibly the most mysterious of them all, lost in Afghanistan far from railroads, the train would be called the Alexander Express and would go from Alexandria Eschate in Tajikistan to Piedmont through the lips of Africa in thirteen days and as many nights, Alexandria in Egypt another decadent city a decadence that does not lack charm when it rains or when it's dark, I remember we had a hotel there on the Corniche the first time we spent hours on the balcony facing the Mediterranean until a big block of cement broke off and came within two inches of killing a guy sitting on the terrace below, he barely raised his eyes, an Egyptian used to the sky almost falling on his head every day, in that double room I slept with Marianne, she got undressed in the bathroom, she had a body, a face to rend your soul and mine asked for nothing but that, in the scent of the Alexandrian rain and sea I got drunk on Marianne's fragrances, our hotel was not the Cecil, nothing of Durrell in our stay, at the time I didn't know any of his books, or Ungaretti or Cavafy that sad little employee in one of the immense banks still there in Ramleh, or in the cotton market, leaving work he visited

the giant bakeries where he dreamt of Antony the vanquished one of Actium as he watched an Arab waiter sway his hips and the sun set on the Mameluk fort, at night everything looks alike, I could be in Alexandria, in that hotel on the Corniche beaten by sea spray just as my window now is streaked with rain, it was sad out and it rained, one night, slowly now, almost at a walking pace like the Italian train I join Marianne in that frozen hotel where we shivered, I close my eyes to remember this contact, the sort of crude, quick coitus, did it take place, did she just let me kiss her, I don't think so, she had kept her sweater on her scarf the room was full of drafts but in the morning there was a big sun the sea was very blue Marianne soon left for Cairo I stayed a few more days walking around in the city and in alcohol, "Ricardo the real Alexandrian pastis" terrible Egyptian anisette I drank without ice in a plastic glass as I watched the sea, glorious solitude, in the morning a tea in one of those bakeries near the Ramleh train station with a cement croissant weighing at least a pound, watching the streetcars rattle by, in a leather armchair that might have known the idle asses of Tsirkas, of Cavafy, of Ungaretti, ghosts in this city gnawed by poverty, with its back to the Mediterranean the way you have your back to the wall, filthy and unhealthy as soon as you leave the downtown neighborhoods that are already filthy, a fine place to wait for the end of the world while you eat fried fish under a big winter sun in the hollow of the sky scoured by the wind, it's very warm in this car, I'll doze off, I'm already half asleep rocked by Marianne with the white arms, her face changes, deformed by the twilight elongated by the trees passing by, I went back to Alexandria I often went back there and not always in dream, to carry out more or less secret transactions with Egyptian generals whose importance was measured not by the number of their stars but their Mercedes, those generals who fought against Islamic terrorism by conscientiously rubbing their foreheads with sandpaper every night to imitate the abrasion of skin against the prayer rug until they got a callus from it and seemed more pious than their enemies, in Egypt everything is always excessive, I took down names addresses networks the traces of activists from Afghanistan or the Sudan, and the military men, each one fatter than the next, peppered their talk with *in sha' allah*, *allahu a'lam*, *la hawla*, they who, with the same devotion, vigorously tortured and shot bearded men in the rear courtyards of overcrowded prisons along the Nile valley, I was indeed in Alexandria, twice I managed to go there by sea, in the summer, a ferry made the crossing from Cyprus, you could go from Beirut to Alexandria by changing boats in Larnaka which is not the most unpleasant of stopovers and, for someone carrying sensitive material as I was, was more practical than the Beirut airport swarming with Syrians, of course Marianne had stopped being there a long time before that the instant Ras et-Tin emerged from the morning fog, you felt as if you were seeing the city from behind, secretly, without any affectation, the way you surprise a naked woman at dawn in her bathroom, and the sea was so clear that, from the rail, you could count the jellyfish in the warm water: on every trip I pictured Marianne, the flash of her underwear in the freezing bedroom, the two seconds of silence facing her bare legs on the edge of the bed, which she had too quickly hidden under the sheets, outside the storm was raging, wind blew against the shutterless bay window, what were we doing in the same bed, she was probably complying with modernity, she saw in this sharing a pallet an innocence laced with danger whereas I, steeped in desire, saw only a magnificent opportunity, the rosé wine called Ruby of Egypt I had filled

her with was still, along with the Ricardo, my Alexandrian madeleine: at a table with the soldiers or police officers who sipped Johnny Walker at lunch without removing their sunglasses I downed Ruby of Egypt and Omar Khayyam in big swigs happy at the memory of Marianne in front of their horrified gazes, as if the Prophet had authorized only British whisky, and I even knew someone close to the president of the Republic who stuffed himself with fried red mullet and washed it down with single malt, a symbol of status, of power, all the while telling me in detail the fate of such-and-such a person, dead under torture or in who knows what torments—why did I so rarely go to Cairo I don't remember anymore, we were given assignments to meet in Alexandria or in Agami at the entry to the Libyan Desert, maybe because it was summer, in winter everything was different, the winter of 1998 something important was being negotiated in the capital, right against the Nile at the edge of Garden City with businessmen who looked like the Communist activists in novels by Tsirkas, boastful talkative men the kind who can put you to sleep as surely as this train at night, cautious but also pleasant, Salomé made into a snake, far from the seedy simplicity of the soldiers and cops, people who took off their tinted pince-nez so as the better to look you in the eyes, assess you, sound you out as the train rocks me, puts me to sleep as in Alexandria where I fell asleep shivering and counting Marianne's unattainable breaths, now despite myself I count the vibrations of the train as it goes over the crossties, one by one, I become aware of my body on the seat, Egyptian, Lebanese, and Saudi businessmen all educated in the best British and American prep schools, discreetly elegant, far from the clichés of colorful, rowdy Levantines, they were neither fat nor dressed up as Bedouins, they spoke calmly of the security of their future investments, as they said, they spoke of our dealings, of the region they called "the area," the Zone, and of their safety, without ever saying the word "weapon" or the word "oil" or any other word for that matter aside from *investment* and *safety*, I wondered, as now the exhausted landscape is hypnotizing me, just as the French say dusk is "the hour between dog and wolf," who were the dogs and who were the wolves, these people who were so courteous, I watched, I listened to my boss, that's what I called him, I listened to my boss convince these pleasant predators, some had sold weapons to the Croats in Bosnia, others to Muslims, still others in Africa before changing over to smuggling with Iraq—the lords of the Zone in that sumptuous hotel in Cairo were present at an informal meeting during which we tried to convince them to go along with us, we informed them of the situation, of the help we could offer them in selling Iraqi oil at the best price, they owned whole tankers full of it, black gold is voluminous and it floats, the Syrians charged them fortunes to send it as if it came straight from their dried-up wells on the Euphrates whereas it had been loaded in Latakia, strange route, everyone had tons and tons of crude oil to sell, so much that a few years later French diplomats coming from Baghdad strolled about Paris in broad daylight with thousands of barrels to sell as if they were pots of jam, they reminded me of the trafficking of the Blue Berets in Bosnia, who sold their rations, their gasoline, and rented out their armored vehicles like taxis for Split or Zagreb, as naturally as anything, happy, with a good conscience and the pocket money these services got them, but still complaining about the danger, just as our businessmen from the Zone didn't see the threat behind the outstretched hand, the deadly games that would play out in the course of the years to come, and of course I was unaware that all

that would end up propelling me like a cannonball towards Rome at 150 kilometers an hour over the frozen plain streaked with trees from the landscape, this landscape eroded by the Lombard twilight illumined suddenly by the Lodi train station: the Lodi bridge over the Adda must not be far away, during the first Italian campaign, not long before going to Egypt, Bonaparte too fought there—Bonaparte maybe the greatest Mediterranean soldier along with Hannibal and Caesar, the somber Corsican beloved of Zeus faced my Croatian ancestors serving under the Austrians lined up neatly in front of the bridge on the other shore of the Adda, 12,000 soldiers, 4,000 horsemen with their cannons, their heavy muskets with the endless bayonets and their military music, Napoleon lent a hand, he helped aim the weapons, he was an artilleryman, right beside his men, he breathed courage and determination into them as Athena did for the Greeks, they will cross, against all expectation they will attack a wooden bridge on which bullets and grapeshot are raining down, a column of 6,000 grenadiers charges on the carpet of their own corpses fallen to the rhythm of the Austrian salvos, in the middle of the bridge they hesitate Lannes the little dyer from Gers advances shouts and with sword drawn at the head of his men emerges onto the opposite shore facing the enemy gunners seized with panic the French forge a path for themselves through the lines with their swords as the cavalry having forded the river upstream massacres the panicking Croats, 2,000 killed and wounded, 2,000 Hapsburgians fallen in a few hours lie strewn across the river's shore, 2,000 bodies that the Lombard peasants will strip of their valuables, baptismal medals, silver or enamel snuffboxes, in the midst of the death rattles of the dying and the wounded on that night of 21 Floreal 1796 Year IV of the Revolution 2,000 ghosts 2,000 shades like so many shapes behind my window, the poplar trees, the factory chimneys, we're heading for the Po the countryside is becoming darker, the Grande Armée which is not called that yet enters Milan the day after the battle of the Lodi bridge, the Little Corporal is born, the myth is underway, Bonaparte will pursue his adventure into Russia, passing through Egypt—he will land in Alexandria two years later with the idea of carving out an empire for France like that of British India, and the dead will be strewn not along the shores of the Adda but around the slopes of the pyramids: 15,000 human corpses and a few thousand Mameluk horses will rot at the entrance to the desert, the ripples of worms will give way to swarms of shifting black flies, on the channels of blood absorbed by the sand, there where, today, it's tourists that succumb to the blows of vendors of postcards and all sorts of souvenirs, in Egypt the flies are innumerable, not far from the Fertile Valley, on the slaughtered cows hanging in the covered markets, irrigated by putrid ditches where the blood of sacrificed animals calmly flows, the smell of dead flesh must have been the same after battle, the flies always win, I rest my head gently against the window, pressed by the speed in the half-light, sleepy from the memory of the dense heat of Cairo, of the dusty mango trees, the shapeless banyan trees, the dilapidated buildings, the pale turbans of the porters and the boiling fava beans that made the dawn stink as much as the livestock hanging in the sun, a stone's throw away from the British embassy where in the 1940s spies swarmed the way stoolpigeons do today, in a nameless boarding house on the top floor of a building whose elevator shaft served as a garbage chute where there piled up, as far as the second-floor landing, ripped-open mattresses and rusty bikes, my room had by some miracle a little balcony and at night, in the entirely relative calm of the city that never sleeps, I looked out on