The *New York Times* bestseller

Colum McCann

'A wondrous book. It left me hopeful'
Elizabeth Strout

Apeirogon

'Nothing like any book you've ever read'
Michael Cunningham

'You have to read *Apeirogon*'
Sunday Times

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'A powerful novel about the shared grief of a Palestinian and Israeli' Andrew Holgate, *Sunday Times*

'A profound account of pain and healing' *Guardian*

'Colum McCann seems to shape-shift with each new book; *Apeirogon* examines the friendship between Israeli and Palestinian fathers who have each lost children to the conflict' *Financial Times*, Books of the Year

'This is a wondrous book. In an accretion of splendid detail, McCann writes with an amazing abundance of humanity as he describes the age old story of inhumanity to man. The affect is absolutely staggering, it will bring you to your knees. Writing at the top of his game, McCann brings us a book that we sorely need. It left me hopeful; this is its gift. What a read!' Elizabeth Strout

'Distinguished by empathy and intelligence, this book marks a new threshold of writing … *Apeirogon* will have a strong effect on all those who read it and, remarkably, could lead to great consequences. Sometimes books can do this' Raja Shehadah

'Every significant novel is an act of reckless originality. Colum McCann's *Apeirogon* is a significant novel … No significant novel resembles any other novel. *Apeirogon* is nothing like any book you've ever read … Think of discovering an entirely unprecedented, and profoundly true, narrative form. Think about feeling that the very idea of the novel, of what it can be and what it's capable of containing, has been expanded, forever' Michael Cunningham

‘A quite extraordinary novel. Colum McCann has found the form and voice to tell the most complex of stories, with an unexpected friendship between two men at its powerfully beating heart’ Kamila Shamsie

‘A jagged, fractured, teeming novel … *Apeirogon* is a daring structural feat, a conspicuously elaborate and multivalent piece of novelistic engineering … The distilled and fractured form has a glistening poetry’ *Times Literary Supplement*

‘A loving, thoughtful, gruelling novel’ *Washington Post*

‘McCann’s epic, involving novel follows the slow-blooming friendship between two men, an Israeli and a Palestinian, linked by the loss of their daughters’ *i paper*

‘A glorious storytelling hybrid … *Apeirogon* is a brilliant novel, formally intriguing, profoundly human’ BBC.com

‘A masterpiece of characterisation and subtle political commentary’ Waterstones.com

‘The latest novel from the National Book Award winner blends fiction with history to examine how two men channel their grief into political power as they become advocates for peace in the Middle East’ *Time Magazine*

‘Colum McCann loves a high-wire act, and *Apeirogon* is a powerful, political tightrope walk of a novel … This beautiful, deeply felt book is first and foremost an extraordinary act of listening’ Nathan Englander

‘A work of incredible magnitude. McCann finds the emotional accuracy, the sensitivity, and the beauty to tell the heartbreaking reality of life in Israel-Palestine, while allowing readers a glimmer of necessary hope. It is greater than a novel in more than one sense, and will both touch and enrich readers, wherever they live and whatever they know about the region’ Assaf Gavron

‘A miraculous book’ Ariel Dorfman

‘Devotees of Colum McCann will find *Apeirogon* teeming with everything they have come to expect from his work: gorgeous prose; a sweeping look at the paradoxical relationship between history and private life; a penetrating examination of the deficiencies and marvels of the human spirit … This book will break your heart and make you rethink how storytelling works’ Téa Obreht

‘A novel of profound empathy with the struggle of ordinary people in conflict. A stunningly well written book. Courageous and necessary, truthful and ultimately hopeful. I think this may be Colum McCann’s masterpiece’ Gabriel Byrne

‘His most ambitious work yet, chronicling the human cost of the Israeli Palestinian conflict in a tale of love and loss that crosses fiction and non-fiction’ *RTÉ Guide*

‘Blending fiction and nonfiction in more than a thousand mini-chapters, McCann’s account includes tales about the history, people, and weapons involved in the occupation of Palestine as well as interviews with Rami and Bassam. McCann’s generous narrative amplifies their emotionally resonant message’ *New Yorker*

‘A beautiful writer: his sense of rhythm, alliteration, and assonance all emerge wonderfully in this book’s prose, as they do in *Let the Great World Spin*. He is also deft with metaphor and understands how to use juxtaposition to upend conventional perception’ *Los Angeles Review of Books*

By The Same Author

FICTION

Apeirogon
Thirteen Ways of Looking
TransAtlantic
Let the Great World Spin
Zoli
Dancer
Everything in This Country Must
This Side of Brightness
Songdogs
Fishing the Sloe-Black River

NON-FICTION

Letters to a Young Writer
The Book of Men (EDITOR)

APEIROGON

A NOVEL

COLUM
McCANN

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Apeirogon is a work of fiction. All incidents and dialogue, and all characters
with the exception of some historical and public figures, are products of the author's
imagination. Where real-life figures appear, the situations, incidents and dialogues
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For Sally

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Readers familiar with the political situation in Israel and Palestine will notice that the driving forces in the heart of this book, Bassam Aramin and Rami Elhanan, are real. By 'real' I mean that their stories – and those of their daughters, Abir Aramin and Smadar Elhanan – have been well documented in film and print.

The transcripts of both men in the centre section of the book are pulled together from a series of interviews in Jerusalem, New York, Jericho and Beit Jala, but elsewhere in this book Bassam and Rami have allowed me to shape and reshape their words and worlds.

Despite these liberties, I hope to remain true to the actual realities of their shared experiences. We live our lives, suggested Rilke, in widening circles that reach out across the entire expanse.

2016

1

The hills of Jerusalem are a bath of fog. Rami moves by memory through a straight stretch, and calculates the camber of an upcoming turn.

Sixty-seven years old, he bends low on the motorbike, his jacket padded, his helmet clipped tight. It is a Japanese bike, 750 cc. An agile machine for a man his age.

Rami pushes the bike hard, even in bad weather.

He takes a sharp right at the gardens where the fog lifts to reveal dark. Corpus separatum. He downshifts and whips past a military tower. The sodium lights appear fuzzy in the morning. A small flock of birds momentarily darkens the orange.

At the bottom of the hill the road dips into another curve, obscured in fog. He taps down to second, lets out the clutch, catches the corner smoothly and moves back up to third. Road Number One stands above the ruins of Qalunya: all history piled here.

He throttles at the end of the ramp, takes the inner lane, passing signs for *The Old City*, for *Giv'at Ram*. The highway is a scattershot of morning headlights.

He leans left and salmons his way out into the faster lane, towards the tunnels, the Separation Barrier, the town of Beit Jala. Two answers for one swerve: Gilo on one side, Bethlehem on the other.

Geography here is everything.

2

THIS ROAD LEADS TO AREA 'A'
UNDER THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY
THE ENTRANCE FOR ISRAELI
CITIZENS IS FORBIDDEN
DANGEROUS TO YOUR LIVES
AND IS AGAINST THE ISRAELI LAW

3

Five hundred million birds arc the sky over the hills of Beit Jala every year. They move by ancient ancestry: hoopoes, thrushes, flycatchers, warblers, cuckoos, starlings, shrikes, ruffs, northern wheatears, plovers, sunbirds, swifts, sparrows, nightjars, owls, gulls, hawks, eagles, kites, cranes, buzzards, sandpipers, pelicans, flamingos, storks, pied bushchats, griffon vultures, European rollers, Arabian babblers, bee-eaters, turtle-doves, whitethroats, yellow wagtails, blackcaps, red-throated pipits, little bitterns.

It is the world's second busiest migratory superhighway: at least four hundred different species of birds torrent through, riding different levels in the sky. Long vees of honking intent. Sole travellers skimming low over the grass.

Every year a new landscape appears underneath: Israeli settlements, Palestinian apartment blocks, rooftop gardens, barracks, barriers, by-pass roads.

Some of the birds migrate at night to avoid predators, flying in their sidereal patterns, elliptic with speed, devouring their own muscles and intestines in flight. Others travel during the day to take advantage of the thermals rising from below, the warm wind lifting their wings so they can coast.

At times whole flocks block out the sun and daub shadows across Beit Jala: the fields, the steep terraces, the olive groves on the outskirts of town.

Lie down in the vineyard in the Cremisan monastery at any time of day and you can see the birds overhead, travelling in their talkative lanes.

They land on trees, telegraph poles, electricity cables, water towers, even the rim of the Wall, where they are a sometime target for the young stone throwers.

4

The ancient sling was made of a cradle of cowskin, the size of an eye-patch, pierced with small holes and held together with leather thongs.

The slings were designed by shepherds to help scare away predatory animals from their roving flocks.

The pouch was held in the shepherd's left hand, the cords in his right. Considerable practice was needed to operate it with accuracy. After placing a stone in the pad, the slingman pulled the thongs taut. He swung it wide above his head several times until the moment of natural release. The pouch opened and the stone flew. Some shepherds could hit a target the size of a jackal's eye from two hundred paces.

The sling soon made its way into the art of warfare: its capacity to fire up a steep slope and battlement walls made it critical in assaults on fortified cities. Legions of long-range slingmen were employed. They wore full body armour and rode chariots piled with stone. When the territory became impassible – moats, trenches, dry desert ravines, steep embankments, boulders strewn across the roads – they descended and went on foot, ornamental bags slung over their shoulders. The deepest held up to two hundred small stones.

In preparation for battle it was common to paint at least one of the stones. The talisman was placed at the bottom of the bag when the slingman went to war, in the hope he would never reach his final stone.

5

At the edges of battle, children – eight, nine, ten years old – were enlisted to shoot birds from the sky. They waited by wadis, hid in desert bushes, fired stones from fortified walls. They shot turtledoves, quail, songbirds.

Some of the birds were captured still living. They were gathered up and put into wooden cages with their eyes gouged out so that they would be fooled into thinking that it was a permanent night-time: then they would gorge themselves on grain for days on end.

Fattened to twice their flying size, they were baked in clay ovens, served with bread, olives and spices.

6

Eight days before he died, after a spectacular orgy of food, François Mitterrand, the French president, ordered a final course of ortolan, a tiny yellow-throated songbird no bigger than his thumb. The delicacy represented to him the soul of France.

Mitterrand's staff supervised the capture of the wild birds in a village in the south. The local police were paid off, the hunting was arranged, and the birds were captured, at sunrise, in special finely threaded nets along the edge of the forest. The ortolans were crated and driven in a darkened van to Mitterrand's country house in Latche where he had spent his childhood summers. The sous-chef emerged and carried the cages indoors. The birds were fed for two weeks until they were plump enough to burst, then held by their feet over a vat of pure Armagnac, dipped head first and drowned alive.

The head chef then plucked them, salted them, peppered them, and cooked them for seven minutes in their own fat before placing them in a freshly heated white cassole.

When the dish was served, the wood-panelled room – with Mitterrand's family, his wife, his children, his mistress, his friends – fell silent. He sat up in his chair, pushed aside the blankets from his knees, took a sip from a bottle of vintage Château Haut-Marbuzet.

— The only interesting thing is to live, said Mitterrand.

He shrouded his head with a white napkin to inhale the aroma of the birds and, as tradition dictated, to hide the act from the eyes of God. He picked up the songbirds and ate them whole: the succulent flesh, the fat, the bitter entrails, the wings, the tendons, the liver, the kidney, the warm heart, the feet, the tiny headbones crunching in his teeth.

It took him several minutes to finish, his face hidden all the time under the white serviette. His family could hear the sounds of the bones snapping.

Mitterrand dabbed the napkin at his mouth, pushed aside the earthenware cassole, lifted his head, smiled, bid goodnight and rose to go to bed.

He fasted for the next eight and a half days until he died.

7

In Israel, the birds are tracked by sophisticated radar set up along the migratory routes all over the country – Eilat, Jerusalem, Latrun – with links to military installations and to the air traffic control offices at Ben Gurion airport.

The Ben Gurion offices are high-tech, dark-windowed. Banks of computers, radios, phones. A team of experts, trained in aviation and mathematics, tracks the patterns of flight: the size of the flocks, their pathways, their shape, their velocity, their height, their projected behavior in weather patterns, their possible response to crosswinds, siroccos, storms. Operators create algorithms and send out emergency warnings to the controllers and to the commercial airlines.

Another hotline is dedicated to the Air Force. *Starlings at 1,000 feet north of Gaza Harbor, 31.52583°N, 34.43056°E. Forty-two thousand sand-hill cranes roughly 750 feet over southern edge of Red Sea, 20.2802°N, 38.5126°E. Unusual flock movement east of Akko, Coast Guard caution, storm pending. Projected flock, Canada geese, east of Ben Gurion at 0200 hours, exact coordinates TBD. Pair of pharaoh eagle-owls reported in trees near helicopter landing pad B, south Hebron, 31.3200°N, 35.0542°E.*

The ornithologists are busiest in autumn and spring when the large migrations are in full flow: at times their screens look like Rorschach tests. They liaise with bird-watchers on the ground, although a good tracker can intuit the type of bird just by the shape of the flock on the radar and the height at which it is coming in.

In military school, fighter pilots are trained in the intricate patterns of bird migration so they can avoid tailspins in what they call the plague zones. Everything matters: a large puddle near the runway might attract a flock of starlings; an oil patch might slicken the wings of a bird of prey, disorienting it; a forest fire might throw a flock of geese far off course.

In migratory seasons the pilots try not to travel for extended periods at lower than three thousand feet.

8

A swan can be as fatal to the pilot as a rocket-propelled grenade.

9

In the fall of the First Intifada, a pair of birds migrating from Europe to northern Africa were found in the mist nets on the western slopes of Beit Jala. They were tangled together side by side, their feet caught in a single strand, their wings frantic against the filaments, so they appeared at first to be just one oddly shaped bird.

They were found by a fourteen-year-old boy, Tarek Khalil, who thought at first they were too tiny to be migrants: perhaps they were blackcaps. He leaned closer. Their agonized chirping astounded him. He untangled the birds, put them in two cloth pouches and brought them up the hillside to the bird-ringing station to be identified and tagged: the wing length, the tail size, the weight, the sex, the percentage of body fat.

It was the first time Tarek had seen such creatures: green-headed, beautiful, mysterious. He leafed through guidebooks and searched the records. Songbirds, most likely from Spain, or Gibraltar, or the south of France. He wasn't sure how to deal with them. It was his job to put a tiny metal ring around their legs, using pliers and a numbered band, so their migration could be documented before he let them go.

Tarek prepared the rings. The birds were so thin that they weighed no more than a spoonful of spice. The metal bands might, he thought, unbalance them in flight.

He dithered a moment, put the birds back in their cloth bags and brought them to his family home in Beit Sahour. He walked up the steep stone streets, cradling the birds in their bags. Cages were hung in the kitchen. For two days the ortolans were fed and watered by Tarek's two sisters. On the third day, Tarek took the songbirds back out to the hillside to let them go, unbanded, amid the apricot trees.

One of the birds remained in the palm of his hand for a moment before flying away. He rolled it around in his fingers. The talons

pinched a callus on his hand. The tiny neck turned against the soft of his palm. It rose, unsure, then flitted away.

Both birds would, he knew, go undocumented. For a keepsake the teenager hung the original aluminium rings – with their sequential numbers – on a thin silver necklace.

Tarek felt the rings bouncing at his throat two months later when he went down to Virgin Mary Street alongside his older brothers to sling stones.

10

The bird-ringing station at the Talitha Kumi school is one of two of its kind in the West Bank: it is part of an environmental centre with a natural history museum, a recycling programme, a water treatment project, an educational unit, and a botanical garden filled with jasmine, hollyhocks, thistles, Roman nettles and rows of yellow-flowered African rue.

The centre looks down on the Wall coiling its way across the landscape. In the distance the ordered terracotta roofs of the settlements step across the hilltops, surrounded by electrified fences.

In the valley there are so many new roads and bridges and tunnels and apartments that the birds gravitate towards the small section of hillside where they can rest and feed among the fruit trees and long grasses.

Walking through the ten-acre environmental centre, amid the tamarisks and olive trees and sabra cactus and the flowering shrubbery of the terraces, is like walking the rim of a tightening lung.

11

A white blimp can often be seen rising over Jerusalem and floating above the city, disappearing, then rising again, disappearing. Watching from the hills of Beit Jala – a few kilometres away – the unmarked blimp looks like a small cloud, a soft white welt, a botfly.

At times birds perch upon it, hitching a lift, drifting lazily for a mile or two before swooping off again: a nightingale celebrating off the back of an eagle.

The airship, nicknamed Fat Boy Two by its Israeli crew and the radar technicians, usually hovers at about a thousand feet in the air. It is made of kevlar and aluminium. A glass cabin is attached to the bottom of the blimp. The thirteen-man room is equipped with a range of computers and infrared cameras powerful enough to pick out and identify the numbers and colours of every single license plate on the highway, even those passing swiftly along.

12

Rami's license plate is yellow.

13

He glances at the clock on the bike, then at his watch. A moment of confusion. A one-hour difference. Daylight saving time. Easy enough to fix the watch but it will, he knows, penetrate the day in other ways. Every year it is the same: for a few days at least, Israel and Palestine are mismatched an hour.

Nothing to be done about it now. No point in turning home. He could kill some time staying on the highway a little longer. Or scoot around some of the back roads in the valleys. Find himself a little stretch where he can push the bike, instil a little torque in the day.

He clicks back into fourth, watches the red line of the revometer. He shoots past a long truck, then eases into fifth.

14

A rubber bullet, when shot from a metal tube on the end of an M-16, leaves the barrel of the gun at more than one hundred miles per hour.

The bullets are large enough to be seen but too fast to be avoided.

They were tested first in Northern Ireland, where the British called them *knee-knockers:* they were designed to be fired at the ground, then bounce up and hit the legs of rioters.

15

The bullet that killed Abir travelled fifteen metres through the air before it smashed into the back of her head, crushing the bones in her skull like those of a tiny ortolan.

She had gone to the shop to buy sweets.

16

For two shekels Abir could have bought a bracelet with *He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not* imprinted along its rim. Instead she bought two *iswarit mlabase*: hard pills of pink, orange, yellow and light blue candy braceleted together on a string.

She slipped the money across the counter into the palm of the shop owner, who fished the bracelets out of a deep glass jar.

As they made their way out towards the school gates, Abir gave the second bracelet to her sister Areen.

17

Every day since Abir was killed, Bassam has walked to the mosque in the hour before sunrise to join the optional pre-dawn prayers.

Forty-eight years old, he moves through the dark with a slight limp, a cigarette cupped in the well of his hand. He is thin, slim, fit. His limp imprints him into the world: otherwise he might slip through almost unnoticed. Still, an agility lurks underneath, a wiry surprise, as if he might burst away from the limp at any moment and leave it abandoned behind him.

He drops his cigarette on the path outside the mosque, scrunches it with his sneaker. In his isolation he smooths his white shirt with his palm, walks up the steps, removes his shoes, enters first with his right foot, kneels at the rear of the hall and bows himself before his limitless God.

He prays for his wife, his five children, the memory of Abir. *Allah, save us from enormities whether open or hidden.* One by one, the prayer beads drop slowly from his fingers to the other side of his hand.

As sunrise claws along the windows, a little splinter of shadow purls along the stone steps. Bassam sweeps the floor with a twig broom and rolls out the mats that stand cylindrical against the east wall.

The smell of charcoal and hemp drifts in from outside. The thrum of awakening traffic, the comfort of the muezzin, the barking of stray dogs.

Bassam works methodically down the length of the hall, covering the entire floor with mats, followed by skullcaps and rosaries for the first of the day's prayers.

18

A town of neither here nor there, Anata appears like an odd urban archipelago – a Palestinian town, in the West Bank, under Israeli occupation, within the Jerusalem governorate. It is surrounded almost totally by the Separation Wall.

A few fine homes stand perched on the upper hillsides – white stone, marble columns, tall arches, high windows – but they soon give way to a chaos below.

The descent is steep and sharp. Satellite dishes mushroom the roofs. Pigeons squawk from cages. Laundry flaps on washing lines strung between apartments. Bare-chested boys swerve their bikes between potholes. Downhill they go, among the overflowing dumpsters and the piles of rubbish.

The streets are all traffic without traffic lights. Everywhere is neon. Tyre shops, bakeries, mobile phone repair kiosks. Men feign nonchalance

in the shadows. Clouds of cigarette smoke hover over them. Women hurry underneath their hijabs. Carcasses of lamb hang forlorn on steel hooks outside the butcher shops. Pop music slides out from the loud-speakers. Bits of rubble lie everywhere.

The town shoulders up against the Shu'fat refugee camp. Shu'fat builds itself upwards, apartment block upon apartment block. Nowhere else to go but the sky.

It is easy to get into the camp – just slide through the metal revolving gate at the checkpoint and walk down the road – but it is tougher to get out. To travel to Jerusalem an ID card or a permit is needed. To get to the rest of the West Bank – which, like Bassam, you must do if you own a green license plate – only a single potholed road allows escape.

19

The rim of a tightening lung.

20

Think of it like this: you are in Anata, in the rear of a taxi, cradling a young girl in your arms. She has just been rubber-bulleted in the back of the head. You are on your way to the hospital.

The taxi is stuck in traffic. The road through the checkpoint to Jerusalem is closed. At best you will be detained if you try to pass through illegally. At worst both you and the driver will be shot while carrying the shot child.

You glance down. The child is still breathing. The driver puts his hand to the car horn. The car behind blares its horn. The car in front joins in. The noise doubles and redoubles. You look out the window. Your car nudges past a mound of rubbish. Plastic bags whip in the wind. You go nowhere. The heat bears down. A bead of sweat drops from your chin onto the plastic seat.

The driver blares his horn again. The sky is blue with torn ribbons of cloud. When the car moves, its front wheel sinks into yet another pothole. The clouds, you think, are the fastest thing around. Then there is movement: two helicopters blading the blue.

A part of you wants to get out and carry the smashed-up child in your arms, but you have to keep her head cradled and try not to move while nothing else on the ground moves either.

21

The biblical Jeremiah – known also as the Weeping Prophet, chosen by God to warn of impending disaster – is said to have been born in ancient Anata. His image can be found on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, painted by Michelangelo in the early sixteenth century.

In the painting, which appears to the side of the high altar, near the front of the chapel, Jeremiah sits, bearded and brooding, in long salmon-colored robes, his finger extended across his mouth, his eyes cast downward.

22

To this day, Bassam is haunted by his daughter's candy bracelet. In the hospital he was met by the taxi driver and the shopkeeper who had travelled in the back with Abir. Abir's shoe had been slipped back on her foot, but the candy bracelet had disappeared: it was not in her hand, not on her wrist, not in her pockets.

In the operating room, Bassam kissed her forehead. Abir was still breathing. The equipment beeped weakly. It was the sort of hospital that needed its own hospital. The doctors were doing everything they could but they had little working equipment.

It was decided to transfer her to Hadassah in Jerusalem. A twenty-minute journey, beyond the Wall.

Two hours later – still stalled in an ambulance near the checkpoint – Bassam reached into her schoolbag and found the candy beneath her maths book.

23

The shot came from the back of a moving jeep. Out of a metal flap in the back door, four inches by four.

24

The Commander of the Border Police wrote in his report that rocks were being pelted from a nearby graveyard. His men were, he said, in mortal danger.

25

Abir was ten years old.

26

She was coming out of the tin-roofed shop with Areen and two friends. It was just after nine in the morning. The winter sun shone slant. School was in breaktime for an hour. They were just about to return for a maths test, multiplication tables.

Twelve times eight, ninety-six. Twelve times nine, one hundred and eight.

The street was cut open with sunlight. The girls passed the concrete bollards set up across the roadway, made their way past the bus stop. Their shadows stretched across the roadblock.

Twelve times twelve, one hundred and forty-four.

27

28

When the armoured jeep turned the corner, the girls began to run.

29

The bullet was metal at the core, but tipped with a special vulcanised rubber. When it hit Abir's skull, the rubber deformed slightly, but then bounced back to its original shape without any evident damage to the bullet itself.

30

The soldiers called the bullets Lazarus pills: when possible, they could be picked up and used again.

31

In the year after the millennium, a rogue artist in Beit Jala hung hollowed-out rubber bullets as tiny improvised bird-feeders in the

trees: the bullets were perforated with small incisions, filled with seed and hung with wire from the branches.

Dangling in mid-air, the bullets attracted a number of small birds: yellow wagtails, sparrows, red-throated pipits.

32

The border guard who fired the shot was eighteen years old.

33

In the 1980s, during operations in Lebanon, Israeli soldiers were sometimes asked to pose for official photographs with their platoon members before they went out on their missions.

As they lined up the soldiers were told to stand far enough apart that there would be ample space between them in the photo.

The photographers made no other demand. The soldiers could smile, they could frown, they could turn directly into the camera, or they could turn their gaze away. No matter – the only thing they had to do was to give each other room, a hand's-breadth of space so their shoulders wouldn't touch, that was all.

Some of them thought it was a ritual, others figured it was a military directive, others considered it to be a matter of decorum and humility.

The soldiers gathered in groups by tanks, in tents, along rows of bunk beds, in armouries, bandstands, canteens, by sheets of aluminium cladding, against the green hills of Lebanon. They adjusted an array of berets: olive-drab, pitch-black, pigeon-grey.

The photos were a theatre of expression: fear, bravado, anxiety, unease, bluster. Confusion, too, at the request to stand a little further apart. After the photos were taken, the soldiers went out on their missions.

In some cases it was days later, in others weeks, in others months, before the reason became apparent: the space between the soldiers was

needed in case the photograph had to be printed in the newspapers, or shown on TV, with the dead identified by a crisp red ring drawn around their faces.

34

Ringing a bird involves a simple twist of the metal with a banding pliers around the leg.

35

The newspaper editors and TV producers were eager to avoid the optics of intersecting lines. Sometimes there were five or six rings in one single photograph.

36

To free a bird from a hanging mist net, the first thing an ornithologist must do is unknot the thin strip of nylon from between the bird's toes and then – depending on the degree of struggle and the length of time it has spent suspended in the net – to calmly untangle the feet, the knees, the belly, the armpit and finally the bird's head, all the time holding the wings against its hammering heart, making sure that it doesn't try to tear open your fingers with its beak or talons.

It is akin to unlooping a tight knot in a silver necklace that, as you open it, wants to spread itself and thrash alive in your hands.

Often the ornithologist will slip a pen or pencil beneath the talons to give the bird a grip for its feet. For larger birds they use branches or shorn-off broom handles.

Some birds, after tagging, have been known to fly off with pieces of broom still held in their talons.

37

The prototypes for rubber bullets were discovered in the 1880s when small pieces of splintered broom handle were fired by the Singapore police at rioters in the streets.

38

Some Israeli soldiers in Lebanon were killed by French-made Milan anti-tank missiles, many thousands of which had been sold by François Mitterrand's government first to Syria, then on the black market to Hizbollah fighters.

Several others were killed by fire from Soviet T-55 tanks, machines that had been considered cumbersome and unwieldy until it was suggested by one general that the tanks should be buried in the ground and used like pillboxes. Only the barrel of the tank's gun stuck out. They were known to the fighters as coffin tanks. Camouflaged, they were difficult to locate from the air, but when discovered these buried targets were easily blown to smithereens.

Six soldiers were killed by fighters who – in an operation known as the Night of the Gliders – floated across the Lebanese border on home-made hang gliders powered by lawnmower engines and attacked an Israeli camp. They were armed with Russian-made AK-47s as well as hand grenades manufactured in the Czech Republic, not far from Theresienstadt, the German-run concentration camp.

39

Folklore has it that, to this day, migratory birds avoid flying over the fields of Theresienstadt.

40

On the Night of the Gliders, in 1987, one of the Israeli guards, Irina Cantor, glanced up at the movement of a faint light in the dark sky. Cantor, who had emigrated from Australia two years before, had just begun her military service.

She was sure that the hang glider was something distant or spectral, a trick of vision against the scraggly cloud.

Afterwards, at the military tribunal, Cantor testified that when the shooting began the sight of the glider confused her so much that she thought that a large bird – something huge and prehistoric – had flapped out of the darkness.

41

Imagine the swan sudden-sucked into the engine of the fighter plane. *Mayday, mayday, mayday.* The brisk crunch of bone and long wing. A whirl of machinery. *Mayday mayday mayday.* The stutter of metal, the crush of feather, the rip of ligament, the chew of bones. Fragments of beak being spat out from the engine. *Mayday mayday mayday.*

42

Imagine, then, the pilot ejecting from the plane, still strapped to his seat, dreidelling through the air with a force not unlike that of a rubber bullet.

43

The term *mayday* – coined in England in 1923, but derived from the French, *venez m'aider,* come to my aid – is always repeated three times, *mayday, mayday, mayday*. The repetition is vital: if said only once it could possibly be misinterpreted, but said three times in a row, it cannot be mistaken.

44

The M-16 used to shoot Abir was manufactured near the town of Samaria, North Carolina. Samaria being the name of so many villages and towns around the world: eight in Colombia, two in Mexico, one each in Panama, Nicaragua, Greece, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Venezuela, Australia and Angola.

Samaria also being home of the ancient capital of the Kingdom of Israel.

45

A metal tube is locked onto the muzzle brake of an M-16 service rifle in order to shoot rubber bullets. The tube can contain up to eight bullets. They are powered by blank rounds fired from the gun's magazine. Inside the attachment are a number of grooves which help the bullets maintain proper trajectory. The grooves are curved like the stripes on a candy cane so that the bullet emerges in a perfect spiral.

46

Seelonce mayday, or mayday silence, is maintained on the radio channel until the distress signal is over. To end the alert the caller says, at least one time, *Seelonce feenee,* an English-accented corruption of *silence fini*.

47

François Mitterrand was buried in Jarnac on the banks of the river he played in as a child, a swiftly moving bolt of brackish green criss-crossed with shadows cast by the hanging trees.

Shortly before he passed away, his eyes flickered and he said to his doctor: I am eaten up inside.

48

Abir wore her school uniform – a white blouse, a navy cardigan, a blue skirt with ankle-length trousers underneath, white socks, dark blue patent shoes, slightly scuffed. Apart from the candy bracelet, her brown leather schoolbag contained two exercise books and three children's books, all Arabic, although Bassam had contemplated teaching her some words of Hebrew, which he had learned as a teenager, many years before, in prison in Hebron, locked away for seven years.

49

His fellow prisoners liked his quiet manner. There was something mysterious about the seventeen-year-old with a limp, his dark skin, his wiry strength, his silence. He was always the first to step up in the canteen when the prison guards came. The limp gave him an edge. The first one or two baton strikes seemed almost reluctant. Often he was the last prisoner standing: the most brutal beatings were yet to come.

Bassam spent weeks upon weeks in the infirmary. The doctors and nurses were worse than the prison guards. They reeked of frustration. They punched him, jabbed him, shaved his beard, denied him medicine, put his water out of reach.

The Druze orderlies were fiercest of all: they understood the Arab consciousness of the naked body, how aware they were, how close it could come to shame. They took away Bassam's clothes, his sheets, tied his arms back so he couldn't cover himself.

He lay there. The ceiling tiles were perforated. He made mental patterns from the tiny holes. Playing cards, diamonds, spades. A form of solitaire. The nurses were unsettled by his quiet manner. They expected shouts, complaints, curses, allegations. The longer his silence, the worse the extra beatings. He could see the weaker nurses begin to twitch with worry. In the end, he thought, he would occupy their brains.

When Bassam finally spoke, his voice rattled the medics: there was something calm about it. He learned the art of the mysterious smile, but he could drop it in an instant, turn it into a stare.

He listened to the doctors talking in the corridor: more and more he understood what they were saying in Hebrew. He decided, even then, that he would one day become fluent.

Word went around that he had become commander of the prison Fatah unit. He grew his beard out. The beatings became more regular.

He turned nineteen years old with two missing teeth, several fractured bones and an empty drip bag in each arm. There were cameras above his prison hospital bed: he angled himself towards the wall so that he could not be seen while he wept himself to sleep.

The days hardened like loaves: he ate them without appetite.

50

After a year in lock-up Bassam established a schedule for classes. English. Hebrew. Arab History. Israeli Law. The Fall of the Ottoman Empire. The History of the Zionist Movement. Pre-Islamic Poetry. The Geography of the Middle East. Life in Palestine under the British Mandate.

Know your enemy, know yourself.

51

In Beersheba prison the married prisoners used cardboard blowguns to send love notes to their wives and children waiting outside the prison gates.

As many as twenty toilet-roll cylinders were taped and glued together to make blowguns that could measure up to five feet. Prisoners wrote messages on small scraps of paper, folded them, then extended the cardboard guns as far as possible out of the cell windows.

The men filled their lungs and blew the notes out the window.

The prisoners learned to make curves in the cardboard, soft angles for reaching around corners to catch favourable winds. Sometimes it took two or three men to handle a blowgun so the paper pipe would not sag or bend.

Most of the time the messages ended up scattered in the prison yard or caught underneath the barbed wire, but every now and then one would catch a strong current and make it all the way to the car park where the wives waited. *Tell Raja to be strong. That day we met was the best of my life. Give the Mecca jigsaw to Ahmed. I cannot wait to leave this place, it rots my heart.*

Bassam watched the women from his cell window. When the notes cleared the prison wall, they hurried over, unfolded the paper and shared them with one another. Once in a while he would see the women dance.

52

In the library – under the Open University system – Bassam found a Hebrew version of the *Mu'allaqat*, the series of sixth-century Arabian poems, translated in a kibbutz by an Israeli literary group just after the Yom Kippur War. It came as a surprise to him. He knew the words by heart in Arabic and so he could compare the languages, learn the Hebrew. He lay on his bare bed and read the poems aloud, then copied them. He brought the poems to one of the prison guards, Hertzl Shaul, a part-time guard and a student of mathematics.

They were still slightly reluctant with one another, the prisoner and the guard, but in recent months had come to think of themselves as acquaintances: Hertzl had saved Bassam from a canteen beating one afternoon.

Bassam had written the words of the poems on the labels from water bottles. Hertzl stuffed the labels inside his shirt, took the poems home. He touched the mezuzah on his door: hidden prayers.

Later in the evening, when his wife Sarah had gone to bed, Hertzl took out the labels and began reading.

53

In the hospital where Abir lay dying, Hertzl – who had quickly removed his kippah as he walked down the corridor – remembered a

line from those prison days: *Is there any hope that this desolation can bring us solace?* He stood by Abir's bed, his head bowed, noticing the pattern of her laboured breathing. A mist lay on the inside of her oxygen mask. Her head was swathed in bandages.

Bassam came and stood beside him, their shoulders not quite touching. Neither man said anything. Many years had gone between them since Bassam's release from prison.

Bassam had co-founded Combatants for Peace two years previously. Hertzl had come to one of the meetings. He was amazed when Bassam began speaking of the peace he had learned in prison, the heft of it, *salaam, shalom,* its confounding nature, its presence even in its apparent absence.

Now Bassam's daughter was dying in front of their eyes. The red lights shone and the hospital equipment beeped.

Hertzl reached across and held his friend's shoulder, nodded to the dozens of others who had gathered around the bedside, including Rami, his wife Nurit, and their oldest son, Elik.

Hertzl slipped the kippah back on his head as he left the hospital. He made his way to the Hebrew University to teach his class in first-year mathematics.

54

Later Hertzl wrote: If you divide death by life, you will find a circle.

55

When a bird has been ringed, the serial number is entered into a global database. The birds, then, are identified with the country where they were tagged: Norway, Poland, Iceland, Egypt, Germany, Jordan, Chad, Yemen, Slovakia. As if they have been ascribed a homeland.

Ornithologists in Israel and Palestine sometimes find themselves in competition if a rare bird, a diederik cuckoo, say, or a windblown stone curlew, is spotted in the seam-zoned sky between both.

Sometimes whistles are used to coax the bird down into a mist net so it can be taken and tagged.

For the ornithologist, it is always a matter of disappointment if the bird has already been ringed elsewhere.

56

When out cataloguing birds in the field, Tarek could feel the ortolan tags moving on the necklace at his throat.

57

Songbirds produce an elaborate call: a meld of territorial protection and courtship.

58

The original meetings of Combatants for Peace took place amid the pine trees of the Everest Hotel in Beit Jala, in Area B, just across the hill from the bird-ringing station.

The two sides met in the hilltop restaurant. Nervously they shook hands and greeted one another in English.

The room had two large sofas, a long table and eight red chairs. Nobody took the sofas at first. They sat at opposite ends of the table. The language that they might use for each other was already fraught: Muslim, Arab, Christian, Jew, soldier, terrorist, fighter, martyr, occupier, occupied.

Eleven of them altogether: four Palestinians, seven Israelis. The Israelis took the batteries out of their phones, placed them on the table. It was safer that way. You never know who's listening, they said. The Palestinians glanced at each other and did the same.

The initial talk was about the weather. Then the journey past the checkpoints. The roads they had taken, the turns, the roundabouts, the

red signs. They had different names for the areas they had travelled through, varying pronunciations of streets. The Israelis said they were surprised how easy it had been to get there: they had driven only four miles. The Palestinians replied that they were not to worry, it would be just as simple to get back. An uneasy laughter went around the table.

The talk returned to the weather once more: the humidity, the heat, the strangely clear sky.

The Palestinians drank coffee, the Israelis carbonated water. All the Palestinians smoked. Only two of the Israelis did. Plates of olives arrived. Cheese. Stuffed vine leaves. The speciality of the restaurant was pigeon: nobody ordered it.

An hour slid by. The Israelis leaned into the table. One of them had, he said, been a pilot. Another, a paratrooper. One had spent much of his service as a commander at the Qalandia checkpoint. They had been in the forces, yes, but they had begun to speak out: against the Occupation, humiliation, murder, torture. Bassam sat stunned. He had never heard an Israeli mention such words before. He was certain they were on an operation. Intelligence, surveillance, an undercover ploy. What confused him was that one of them, Yehuda, looked like a settler. Stout and spectacled, with a long beard. Even his hair wore the mark of a kippah. Yehuda had been an officer in Hebron. He had, he said, begun to rethink it all, the conscription, the operations, all the talk of a moral army. Bassam leaned back in his chair and scowled. Why would they send such a glaring ruse? What kind of mockery was this? Perhaps, he thought, it was a form of double-think, triple-think: the Israelis were known for it, their mesmerising chess, their theatre, intricate and ruthless.

The sun went down over the steep hills. One of the Israelis tried to pay, but Bassam put his hand on the man's elbow, and took the bill.

— Palestinian hospitality, he said.

— No, no, please, let me.

— This is *my* home.

The Israeli nodded, bowed his head, blanched. The two groups shook hands, bid each other goodbye. Bassam was sure they would never see each other again.

That evening he put their names in a search engine. Wishnitzer.

Alon. Shaul. They had used some of the same words in blogs he found online: *inhumane, torture, regret, Occupation.* He closed the files, reloaded his search engine, just in case: perhaps his computer had been interfered with somehow. He would put nothing past them. He searched again. The words were still there. He put a message through to Wishnitzer that he was ready to meet with them again.

A few weeks later they ate dinner at the Everest Hotel. Two of the Israelis ordered pigeon. A toast was made. Bassam raised his water glass.

It slowly dawned on Bassam that the only thing they had in common was that both sides had once wanted to kill people they did not know.

When he said this, a ripple of assent went round the table: a slow nodding of heads, a further loosening. A shiver went among them. My wife Salwa, my daughter Abir, my son Muhammad. Then, from across the table: my daughter Rachel, my grandfather Chaim, my uncle Josef.

It was an idea so simple that Bassam wondered how he had ignored it for so long: they too had families, histories, shadows.

After two hours they extended hands to shake and promised they would try to meet a third time. The light slanted through the tall trees. Some of the Israelis were still worried about getting home: what if they strayed by mistake into Area A, what would happen?

— Don't worry, said Bassam, drive behind me awhile, I'll show you, just follow me.

The Israelis laughed nervously.

— I'm serious. If there's any trouble I'll take care of it. I'll tap my brakes three times. I go right, you go left.

They sat for another half-hour over coffee and discussed what names they might use if they really were to create an organisation together. It was a difficult thing to find a good name. Something catchy, provocative, yet neutral too. Something with meaning but not offensive. Combatants for Peace. That might work. It held contradiction.

To be in combat. To struggle to know.

59

On the wall of the restaurant were photographs of frigate birds scissoring over the sea.

60

Area A: administered by the Palestinian Authority, open to Palestinians, forbidden, under Israeli law, to Israeli citizens. Area B: administered by the Palestinian Authority, with shared security control with Israel, open to Israelis and Palestinians. Area C: an area comprising Israeli settlers and mostly rural Palestinians, administered by Israel and containing all the West Bank settlements.

61

Among the Israeli contingent in the Everest Hotel was Rami's twenty-seven-year-old son, Elik Elhanan, who had served in an elite reconnaissance unit in the army.

At the second meeting Elik talked about his late sister Smadar, killed in a suicide bombing in Jerusalem, but the story did not register fully for Bassam until many months later.

Bassam himself was just a few years out of prison. Abir was still alive. Bassam had not met Rami. Rami was a member of the Parents Circle, but Bassam was not yet.

All of that confusion was still to happen.

62

(Area A being comprised of the main Palestinian cities and villages, hemmed in, patchworked, and secured by dozens of Israeli checkpoints, patrolled by Palestinian security forces but open, at any time, to the Israeli army.)

(Area B, under Palestinian civil administration, under Israeli security control with cooperation from the Palestinian Authority police, so that the Palestinian security forces operate only with Israeli permission.)

(Area C, the largest of the areas, containing most of the West Bank's natural resources, controlled by Israel, with the Palestinian Authority responsible for providing education and medical services to Palestinians only, with Israel providing exclusively for the security and administration of the settler population in over one hundred illegal settlements, with ninety-nine per cent of the area being heavily restricted or off-limits for construction or development to Palestinian residents, it being almost impossible to secure a permit for any building or water project.)

(Also, Area H1 and H2 in the West Bank city of Hebron, eighty per cent of the city administered by the Palestinian Authority and twenty per cent controlled by Israel, including areas open only to Israelis and those with international passports, known as sterile streets.)

(Also, Zone E1, twelve square kilometres of disputed/occupied undeveloped land outside annexed East Jerusalem, home to Bedouin tribes and bounded by Israeli settlements, falling within Area C.)

(Also, the Seam Zone, the land between the Green Line and the Separation Barrier, in the West Bank, also known as the closed zone, also known as No-man's-land, lying entirely in Area C, populated mostly by Israelis living in settlements, accessible to Palestinians by permit only.)

63

Beyond their immediate calls of distress, it is not known exactly how, or even if, different species of birds communicate with one another.

64

Rami likes the feeling of entering the tunnel while it is still dark outside. A bit of comfort. It's different from entering during daytime

when he feels subsumed by the darkness. This early in the morning it is almost the opposite: he enters the light, fluorescent as it is.

The motorbike purrs along in the fast lane. He shifts up into fifth gear, leans into the machine a little, his knees touching the petrol tank. In his helmet, the sound of the stereo. The Hollies. The Beach Boys. The Yardbirds. The Kinks.

It is a cold morning with a late October chill. He reaches down and zips the side vent in his trousers, tightens his fingers in his gloves. Nothing in his side-view mirrors, he slides across into the slower lane, keeping the revometer steady.

A kilometre long, the tunnel was blasted out from the mountain under the supervision of French engineers. A number of New York-based sandhogs were brought across to supervise the work.

The tunnel runs under the town of Beit Jala, dovetailing in parts with the Way of the Patriarchs, the ancient biblical route.

Rami emerges beneath the concrete blast walls into the still-dark, and after a few moments passes the large red sign – in Hebrew, Arabic, English – without even thinking about it.

THE ENTRANCE FOR ISRAELI
CITIZENS IS FORBIDDEN

The engine scoffs slightly as he turns the handle on the throttle. He will circle around and take the back road this morning, past the yellow gates and beyond. No nerves, no fear. He is well used to it: he makes the trip to Beit Jala at least twice a week.

All morning he has driven fast, but he likes the moments when things slow down to a near-halt and he can feel the space around him, everything held in suspension like in a photograph where he is the only moving thing.

It never ceases to astound him what a difference a border can make: the arbitrary line, drawn here, drawn there, redrawn further along.

No soldiers in sight, no border guards, nothing.

The road rises in a steep ascent. He knows the area well, the barbed-wire fence, the rusting cars, the dusty windscreens, the low houses, the hanging flowerpots of fuchsias, the gardens, the wind chimes made

out of tear gas canisters, the black water tanks on the roofs of apartment blocks.

Once, long ago, these roads were so much easier to travel. Even in the bad times. No bypasses, no permits, no walls, no unapproved paths, no sudden barricades. You came and you went. Or you didn't. Now it is a tangle of asphalt, concrete, light pole. Walls. Roadblocks. Barricades. Gates. Strobe lights. Motion activation. Electronic locks.

He is not surprised by the three dark-haired Palestinian boys who seem to appear straight out of the ground. The first hops a section of broken concrete and puts one foot on a roadside tyre as if to trampoline off it. The boy is lean and jaunty. The others are older, slower, wary, keeping to the side of the road. Fifty yards, forty yards, twenty, ten, until Rami is almost level with the lead boy. He lets off the throttle and edges the bike closer, beeps the horn in tandem with the slap of sandals.

Dark feet, white soles. A long scar on the back of his calf. A blue-and-white striped shirt. Smadar's age. Younger even.

The boy's legs piston. His chest strains against the small swoosh on his T-shirt. The muscles in his neck tighten. The boy grins, an expanse of white teeth. The road rises further. Just beneath a grey light pole – the yellow bulb still shining in the morning – the boy lets out a high yell and then stops abruptly, throws his arms in the air, turns, vaults over a concrete barricade.

In the side mirrors, the other two boys meld into the roadside ruin.

Rami can't quite tell if it was the exertion of the run, the yellow license plate, or the sight of the bumper sticker on the front left of the bike – זה לא ייגמר עד שנדבר – that makes the boy stop so quickly.

65

זה לא ייגמר עד שנדבר

It will not be over until we talk.

66

He clicks back to third to accommodate the rising road.

Further up the hill is the bird-ringing station at Talitha Kumi, the steep streets, the stone walls, the centre of town, the Christian churches, the careful iconography, the tin roofs, the high limestone houses looking out over the lush valley, the hospital, the monastery, the small countries of light and dark rushing across the vineyard, all the atoms of the approaching day stretching out in front of him.

Today, like most days, just another day: a meeting with an international group – seven or eight of them, he has heard – in the Cremisan monastery.

He turns the corner at the top of Manger Street.

67

In the distance, over Jerusalem, the blimp rises.

68

He followed the blimp one Sunday, a year ago, for a couple of hours, surveilling it, surveilling him, wondering if he could find a pattern to its movement.

He went corner to corner, street sign to street sign, out into the countryside, then parked his bike at the overlook at Mount Scopus, sat on the low stone wall, shaded his eyes and stared upwards, watching the blimp drift in the blue. He had heard from a friend that it was a weather machine, gauging moisture levels and checking air quality. There was always a backup for the truth. And, in truth, how many sensors? How many cameras? How many eyes in the sky looking down?

Rami often felt that there were nine or ten Israelis inside him, fighting. The conflicted one. The shamed one. The enamoured one. The bereaved one. The one who marvelled at the blimp's invention. The one

who knew the blimp was watching. The one watching back. The one who wanted to be watched. The anarchist. The protester. The one sick and tired of all the seeing.

It made him dizzy to carry such complications, to be so many people all at once. What to say to his boys when they went off to military service? What to say to Nurit when she showed him the textbooks? What to say to Bassam when he got stopped at the checkpoints? What to feel every time he opened a newspaper? What to think when the sirens sounded on Memorial Day? What to wonder when he passed a man in a kaffiyeh? What to feel when his sons had to board a bus? What to think when a taxi driver had an accent? What to worry about when the news clicked on? What fresh atrocity lay on the horizon? What sort of retribution was coming down the line? What to say to Smadari? What is it like being dead, Princess? Can you tell me? Would I like it?

Below him, on the slope, young boys lazed on the hillside on the backs of thin Arabian horses. The boys wore immaculate white jeans. Their horses muscled beneath them. Rami wished he could somehow reach out to them, approach them, say a word. But they knew already who he was from his license plate, *what* he was, just from the way he carried himself. They would know from his accent too, even if he spoke to them in Arabic. An older man on a motorbike. His pale white skin. His open face. The hidden fear. I should go and tell them. I should stride across and look them directly in the eye. Her name was Smadar. Grape of the vine. A swimmer. A dancer too. She was this tall. She had just cut her hair. Her teeth were slightly crooked. It was the start of the school year. She was out shopping for books. I was driving to the airport when I got the news. She was missing. We knew. My wife and I. We knew. We went from hospital to police station, back again. You cannot imagine what that is like. One door after another. Then the morgue. The smell of antiseptic. It was unspeakable. They slid her out on a metal tray. A cold metal tray. She lay there. Your age. No more. No less. Let's be honest here, guys. You would have been delighted by the news. You would have celebrated. Cheered. And I would once have cheered for yours too. And your father's. And your father's father.

Listen to me. I admit it. No denial. Once, long ago. What do you think of that? What sort of world are we living in? Look up. It's watching us, all of us. Look. Look. Up there.

After a while the blimp began to press down further upon him, like a light hand upon his chest, the pressure growing firmer, until all Rami wanted to do was find a place where he could not be seen. It was so often like this. The desire to vanish. To have all of it gone in a single smooth motion. To wipe it all clean. Tabula rasa. Not my war. Not my Israel.

Show me, then. Convince me. Roll back the rock. Return Smadar. All of her. Gift her back to me, all sewn up and pretty and dark-eyed again. That's all I ask. Is that too much? No more whining from me, no more weeping, no more complaints. A heavenly stitch, that's all I ask. And bring back Abir too, for Bassam, for me, for Salwa, for Areen, for Hiba, for Nurit, for all of us. And while you're at it bring back Sivan and Ahuva and Dalia and Yamina and Lilly and Yael and Shulamit and Khalila and Sabah and Zahava and Rivka and Yasmine and Sarah and Inaam and Ayala and Sharon and Talia and Rashida and Rachel and Nina and Mariam and Tamara and Zuhal and Riva and every other one under this hot murdering sun. Is that too much to ask for? Is it?

He felt the bike galloping underneath him as he drove back to his house and sat in his office, closed the curtains, rearranged the photographs on his desk.

69

Smadar. From the Song of Solomon. The grapevine. The opening of the flower.

70

Abir. From the ancient Arabic. The perfume. The fragrance of the flower.

71

He has only ever been stopped once on his motorbike. He had heard that the back road from the West Bank was closed, but it was the easiest and quickest way home. The rain hammered down in slanting sheets. He took the chance. What was the worst that could happen: to be stopped, to be questioned, to be turned away?

He had, he knew – even at his age – an impish grin, a chubby face, a soft pale gaze. He sat low and throttled the engine. The bike sprayed up droplets behind him.

A sudden spotlight funnelled a shot of fear down his spine. He throttled back, sat up on the bike. His visor was blurry with raindrops. The spotlight enveloped him. He braked in the pool of brightness. The back wheel skidded slightly in the oily rain.

A shout insinuated itself into the night. The guard was trembling as he ran through the downpour. The light was scattershot with silver spears of rain. The guard pointed his gun at Rami's helmet. Rami raised his hands slowly, opened the visor, greeted him in Hebrew, *Shalom aleichem, shalom,* in his thickest accent, showed him his Israeli identity card, said he lived in Jerusalem, he had to get home.

— The road's closed, sir.

— What do you want me to do, go back *there*?

A raindrop fell from the barrel of the soldier's rifle: Go back, yes, sir, go back, right now, this road is off-limits.

A tiredness had crawled into Rami's bones. He wanted to be home with Nurit, in his comfortable chair, a blanket over his knees, the simple life, the ordinary mundanities, the private pain, not this forsaken rain, this roadblock, this cold, this shaking gun.

He lifted the visor further: I was lost, I got lost, and you want me to go back there, are you mad? Look at my ID I'm Jewish. I got lost. Lost, man. Why in the world would you want me to go back?

The boy's gun swung back and forth wildly.

— Go back, sir.

— Are you fucking crazy? You think I have a death wish? I got lost, I took the wrong road, that's all.

— Sir. I'm telling you it's closed.

— Tell me this –

— What?

— What Jew in their right mind would go to the West Bank in the first place?

The boy's face puzzled. Rami tightened the throttle, gave the engine some throat.

— Go ahead, habibi, shoot me if you have to, but I'm going home.

He watched a fault line develop further on the boy's brow, a little earthquake of confusion as Rami closed the visor, turned on his hazards and drove on, his whole body conspired into the bike, all the time thinking of the gun aimed at him, a bullet slamming into the small of his back.

72

When, the next day, in the office of the Parents Circle, he began to tell Bassam the checkpoint story, he stopped short and remembered the shiny blue shoe sailing through the air and the bullet ripping into the back of Abir's skull. He had no desire to tell last night's story any more.

73

The shopkeeper was named Niesha the Ancient, even though she was just thirty-four years old. She heard the pops. One, two, three, four. A screech of tyres. For a moment there was silence. Her hands remained on the long wooden counter. Then the shouting began: the high pitch of schoolchildren, girls mostly, an unusual sign: the girls were usually quiet. Niesha reached for her keys from the cash register.

Outside, a commotion. A child on the pavement. A blue skirt. A white cotton collar blouse. A discarded shoe. Niesha dropped to her knees. She knew the child's name. She leaned down to check the pulse.

— Wake up, Abir, wake up.

Screams rang out. A crowd huddled over the child. She was unconscious. Men and women keyed their phones for a signal.

Word went around that traffic had been blocked by the soldiers at the far end of the road. Nothing was being allowed through: no ambulances, no police, no paramedics.

— Wake up, wake up.

Minutes passed. A young teacher crossed the roundabout, wailing. A battered taxi pulled up. The young driver waved his arms. Kids streamed from the school gates.

Niesha helped pick Abir from the ground and bundle her into the back seat of the taxi. She wedged herself into the well between the front and back seats to keep the child from rolling off. The driver glanced over his shoulder and the taxi lurched. Someone had thrown the lost shoe into the back of the car. Niesha slipped it on Abir's foot. She felt the warmth of the toes. She knew instantly that she would never forget the surprising warmth of the flesh.

The taxi raced through the heart of the marketplace. Word had already jumped around Anata and Shu'fat. Calls went out from the mosques, the balconies, the side streets. Kids ran from the alleyways, streamed down towards the school. The driver braked only for the speed bumps. He hit traffic on the far side of the market. He laid his hand on the car horn. The cars around them joined in the hellish symphony.

Niesha lay on the floor beneath Abir, reaching up, keeping the child's head still. Abir's eyes fluttered. She made no sounds. Her pulse was slow and irregular. Niesha touched the child's toes once more. They had grown colder.

The windows of the taxi were down. Loudspeakers outside. Flags unfurling. The prospect of riot. The car jolted forward. The driver invoked the name of Allah. The tumult rang in Niesha's ears.

The hospital building was low-slung and dingy. A team waited on the steps. Niesha took her hand from Abir's head and opened the rear door before the taxi had even stopped. Shouts went up for a trolley. The front steps of the hospital were mayhem.

Niesha watched the trolley disappear in a swamp of white coats. These were the days of small shrouds: she had seen so many of them carried along the streets.