The wind loses the key to the wind.¹ There is no such thing as rooted identity; one is born Christian, Jewish, or Muslim, just as water from the sky runs into rivers or seas. My sole lasting image is the outline of Djebel Boukornine peeking through the blue mists of the Gulf of Carthage, like Vesuvius in the Bay of Naples. Childhood is a volcano that buries you inch by inch in the trembling ash of oblivion. I recall four elements only: the ochre earth, the hundred azure layers of sea, the stunningly fragrant air, the fierce sun drenching all creation. Air, wind, and fire are beyond our grasp: elusive, the realm of djinns and spirits has no earthly grounding. Humans, poor creatures, are bound to the land, where we live and perish, like flowers and cities.

A child of La Goulette² on my mother’s side (her maiden name was Guedj), and of the Hara, the Jewish quarter of the Tunis medina, on my father’s side, I don’t recall any notable differences between my family and our Muslim neighbors in our lively continuum of language, shared tastes, and pace of life; amid the heady fragrance of spices, ripe olives, jasmine and orange flowers; in the blue-hued shade of the giant eucalyptus trees of the municipal garden where we used to stroll; or down on the shores of the gulf, or on the hill in Sidi Bou Said. Back in the Hara, the grandfather would wear a chéchia, and the grandmother, a long,  

1. The title of this story is a reference to a line from a poem by the Guatemalan writer Miguel Angel Asturias titled “Mis huellas son esmeraldas de agua,” published in the collection Clarivigilia primaveral (1965). The line reads: “The earth feeds on footprints, the sky feeds on wings.”
2. La Goulette is the port of Tunis, in the northern suburbs of the capital, and a popular seaside spot for Tunisia’s Jewish community.
multicolored housedress and a headscarf that she would chew at one end. What child could possibly comprehend the peculiar phenomenon that aggregates people into families and tribes, and, in doing so, distances them from others? The Abrahamic religion of Islam conquered, subjected, and converted the Berbers, whether

3. A chéchia (often transliterated as shesha) is a soft skullcap worn by many Muslim men, particularly in North Africa. In certain regions, it was also worn by Jewish men and boys.
animist, Christian, or Jewish, Arabizing them in the process. Down through the centuries, dhimmified indigenous Sephardic Jews,\(^4\) freshly arrived from Spain after the Reconquista, and native Muslims that dynastic wars caused to scatter and intermingle all across Ifriqiya and Morocco into the far-off lands of the Levant and even Mauritania\(^5\) (before the eventual fall of the Ottoman Empire and the colonial invasions), never ceased to merge, by will or by force, to blend their arts and customs, to piece together that mosaic of common manners and beliefs, to share the same essential tastes, harmonies, superstitions, and enchantments.

In this civilizing patchwork, of which the Mediterranean is so rightly proud, the Jews of North Africa themselves are made up of more than one ethnic group (if the term “ethnic group”—less loaded than “race”—makes any sense). For instance, nothing could be further from the deeply Arabized paternal branch of the family than the Guedjs, who were originally from Constantine, the city of suspension bridges, where Judeo-Arab Andalusia, expelled from its gardens of contemplation and its ethereal architecture, was able to take root and thrive.\(^6\) My maternal grandmother Baya, née Harrar—a forceful woman who was one of the first in Algeria to demand the right to divorce, at the risk of her life—could neither read nor write, but was a happily bilingual storyteller. Though born into Arabic, she spoke in a delightful French to us children, who were destined for expatriation. Remarried to a railroad employee who was gassed at Verdun and died in the 1930s in Sfax, where his company had assigned him after stints in Tunis and Gabès, Baya made a first attempt at immigration to the metropole, all her children in tow, my adolescent mother being the eldest. This was in 1939. When the Nazis invaded Paris, some good souls showed them the way out. After a lifesaving stay with a family of Catholic peasants in the Yonne region, Baya managed to get everyone back to Tunis via Marseille, where she opened a little business to keep her smala alive.\(^7\)

It was in the early 1940s that a somewhat turbulent young man from the medina, working odd jobs as a stonemason, a porter, or a small-time cook, first crossed paths with the too delicate Miss Alice, nicknamed la Parisienne because of her permed light-brown hair. He fell head over heels in love, as the story goes, and swept her into wedlock. Her bearings already compromised following the recent death of her father, la Parisienne was quickly disillusioned with the

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4. The original invents a French version of the Arabic term dhimmi; the translation attempts to render a similar neologism in English. *Dhimmi* means “protected person.” *Dhimma* status is an historical feature of Muslim law that offered certain forms of protection to “people of the book” (namely, Jews and Christians) living in Islamic lands. While *dhimmis* had fewer rights and protections than Muslims, the existence of this category nonetheless provided guarantees of some state protections. (See Introduction for more detail.)

5. *Ifriqiya*, derived from the Latin for Africa, has historically referred to the coastal region of North Africa that encompasses today’s eastern Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya.

6. Constantine is a city in northeastern Algeria.

7. *Smala* is an Arabic term that refers to the tents sheltering the extended family of a clan leader. It may also mean a large following, usually family members, who accompany the leader whenever he changes location. Colloquially used, even in French, to refer to a large family or a metaphorical tribe.
marriage. Right around that time, the Germans had just invaded Tunisia and were going about constructing a concentration camp for suspicious people and Jews. Khamous, Alice's husband, would be incarcerated there for several months before being liberated by the Americans. They nicknamed their firstborn “Jimmy” in a gesture of gratitude.

Confronted with a situation of crushing poverty long before the events that would force the ancestral Jewish community to abandon its beloved, sun-drenched Tunisia, my parents, my elder brother, and myself (not counting the child who had died) found ourselves like exiles in our own country, in transit from our very existence, in the utter confusion caused by those moments of deep-seated parental disagreement that suddenly emerge, leaving artfully patterned cracks in their offspring. In the East, whether Middle, Near or further afield, Abrahamic tradition yokes father to son: the ancients assumed and assuaged the obviated sacrifice of Isaac or Ismaël, holding back the sacrificing hand by the long tradition of temperance and internalization of this violent initiation, of which circumcision is but one manifestation. We had no symbol-bearing ancestors, Jewish or Muslim, in our household, only a lapsed father who brandished the bladeless knife of disunion and a mother driven mad with disappointment, her dreams dashed. Perhaps it was inevitable: when an entire population is threatened by upheaval linked to decolonization and feverish nationalist identity politics, exile might end up preventing the breakup of a structurally unsound family adrift in the world. The fact is that the legacy of Baya’s world was simply too distant from the paternal world of the chéchia-wearing patriarch; her side of the family’s emphatic use of Arabic was interpreted in a variety of ways within a context dramatized by independence wars and invasion.

We dream today of returning to a golden age, an era that was never anything but a product of our fervent imagination, no doubt: Jews and Muslims will all be Tunisians together on our shared ground, from the moment that we democratically defend the common homeland, its memory, its children, and the prodigious unity of its riches, both material and spiritual. Everyone knows Tunisia’s timeline of successive invasions and dependencies: Phoenician, Roman, Arab, Ottoman, Franco-Ottoman, before sovereignty was at last recovered with Bourguiba, who proclaimed in resounding Republican tones: “Out of a smattering of people, a jumble of tribes and clans, all bent beneath the yoke of resignation and fatalism, I have forged a citizenry.” Poor among the poor back then, their line of descent now more or less assimilated everywhere in the world, the ancestral Jews of the medina might well have rightfully belonged to that citizenry, that people. In an Islamized land, under the French Protectorate, we were children like any other, just barely aware of the torturous conflicts haunting the world of adults.

Born in the nineteenth century, Baya had forgotten nothing of the anti-Jewish riots that broke out long before the 1934 pogrom in Constantine—incited by the anti-Semitic forces of Second- and Third-Republic France, by way of the Second Empire—and that Adolphe Crémieux, a descendant of the Pope's Jews, attempted to curb with his eponymous decree of 1870. Against a backdrop of economic crisis and clashing identities, the decree’s unfortunate consequence would be to definitively isolate Jewish Algerians from their Muslim compatriots. On the paternal side, family lore tells of a rebellious act on the part of the grandfather who, sabered by one of the Dey’s soldiers, in turn knocked the soldier off his horse—which might explain why his children and grandchildren had such a hard time obtaining their naturalization after the war. And, on May 20, 1941, the maternal family was probably living in Gabès, where seven Jews were massacred on the square right outside the synagogue.

We children had no notion of our parents’ anxious memories. How did the idea of exile suddenly take hold, once and forever? I remember the Arabic of speech and song from my earliest years. We must have understood it, bathed as we were in its intonations. Then, from one day to the next, at the dawn of the 1950s, the adults stopped speaking to us in Arabic. Our banishment was sealed with this self-imposed embargo. Poor folks cut their most essential ties with their own offspring by ceasing to speak to them in the native tongue, though they would continue, backs turned, to talk among themselves in Arabic, in what looked like a plot to sever us from our origins, leaving us with only the French language in common. And that is how I was born to French in the programmed oblivion of the ancestral language.

Still, since then, music has remained a bridge to our deepest history. Music is always first, in a way, since we are all born blind; while in the womb, sound takes precedence over vision. In the phonic universe of my early years, it is Arab music that stands out: it was Farid el Atrache, Mohamed Abdel Wahab, and Abdel Halim Hafez that we heard in cafés, in the street, whether in Tunis or Belleville, and similarly, the dirge-like strains of sacred music sung and murmured in mosques and synagogues. My grandmother Baya’s hand-cranked phonograph never left her side. Small local orchestras in the working-class neighborhoods of Tunis would play popular songs by Oum Kalthoum and Asmahan, classical Egyptian music, and you could even detect inflections of highbrow Arab-Andalusian harmonies in Algerian chaâbi tunes, or in the rumbas of Lili Boniche.

10. Dey is an Ottoman honorific term meaning “uncle.” During the Ottoman rule of North Africa, it was also the title given to the rulers of the various regencies.
11. Chaâbi (also chaabi or sha-biî) is Arabic for “folk,” and refers to the popular roots of this North African musical genre. Songs are sung in local dialects, rooted in the Andalusian tradition, but with new rhythms. Born in the Casbah of Algiers to a Sephardic family, Lili Boniche (1922–2008) was
Jews and Muslims had the same passion for the Arab-Turkish maqâm, the system of special intervals between notes in the melody that makes the music sound so organically improvised. The eastern melodic line is the stuff of time itself vibrating in our memory, an overwhelming nostalgia, a longing that is renewed with every listen.

Today, how am I supposed to cull two or three memories of my Tunisian childhood when everything is tangled together between the sinuous black and white passages of the Tunis medina and the alleyways of Ménilmontant in Paris, where we landed quite naturally in a neighborhood that was practically a carbon-copy of our old one, with its cheap restaurants and hovels? What I have kept close to my heart are the faces of women, Muslim and Jewish, grandmothers and aunts, neighbors, companions in the tiny gestures of exchange that our proximity asked of us, a closeness that revealed more complicity than dissimilarity. From those women, without ever being taught, I learned how to make real Berber couscous with its twenty side dishes and salads, the exquisite mouloukhia made from malva leaves, and all sorts of holiday sweets, like makrouds with almonds or dates, and zlabiyas soaked in honey. Most especially, I learned how to see the ancestral mercy of the Orient in something as simple as a smile. Childhood is borne by the search for those faces of women, young or old, tilted ever so slightly. What secrets are hidden behind their stately languidness? The precious intertwining of birth and death would be my guess, back there as here, from one shore of the Mediterranean to the other, in the endless loop of disremembered origins.

Not too long ago, on a return visit to the beaches of La Goulette, looking a little lost perhaps, I walked around the old, dilapidated casino that was slated for demolition. A very old man, in chèche and djellaba, looking like the local

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one of mid-century Algeria’s most famous singers. He performed across Europe and North Africa, in both French and Arabic.

12. A soup made with chicken and vegetables, mouloukhia (or mulukhiya) takes its name from the Arabic for its main ingredient, malva leaves, which are sometimes called Jew’s mallow or Nalta jute, and have the consistency of okra when cooked; makrouds are diamond-shaped North African cookies made with semolina flour and filled with dates, figs, or nuts; zlabiyas are fritters: dough is sweetened with some combination of sugar, honey, and rose or orange-blossom water, and then deep fried in oil. The dish is found, with slight variations, throughout South and West Asia, and in North and West Africa.

13. A chèche (known as a lithâm in Arabic and as a tagelmust in English) functions as both a veil and a turban. Worn primarily by the Tuareg Berbers, the chèche is a single, long piece of cotton, usually dyed blue and wound around the head and the lower part of the face, to protect the mouth and nose from sand and dust. Resembling the Egyptian jalabiya (or galabeya), the djellaba (or jillaba) is a loose-fitting, long-sleeved outer robe worn in North Africa by both men and women. It is interesting to note that, unlike with the food words in note 12, the author does not italicize chèche or djellaba in the original French. While this could be a simple omission, it is more likely a reflection of the ways certain Arabic words have become naturalized in the French language.
muezzin, called out softly, a trace of irony on his lips. “*Ya hasra!*”\(^{14}\) he said as he passed—the good old days!—as if I somehow stood out for him in this timeless place, in a kind of implicit recognition. Like Vesuvius looming over Pompeii, smoke always seemed to be rising out of Djebel Boukornine as it stood above the Gulf of Tunis—but it was only the sea’s haze rising into the shimmering sunlight.

—*Translated by Jane Kuntz*

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\(^{14}\) The word *hasra* in Arabic means “heartbreak,” and the expression *ya hasra* can be translated as “what a shame” or even “poor thing.” Given that it is typically uttered at the sight or memory of something ancient or old and no longer seen, and that it is generally nostalgic, we’ve opted to imagine the elderly man regretting “the good old days,” rather than pitying the author.