Assassinated in May 1993, Tahar Djaout published four novels and two poetry collections before his murder. Djaout's fiction was marked throughout by his uncompromising stance toward corruption and what he considered to be a betrayal of history and of the Algerian Revolution's ideals. In addition to being a poet and novelist, Djaout was a highly regarded journalist living and working in Algiers. His dedication to exposing the truth about Algeria's real difficulties and political and social realities led him to collaborate on the creation of an independent weekly newspaper in January of 1993 entitled Ruptures. One of more than a hundred Algerian "intellectuals" to have been killed since 1992, Djaout produced fiction that is characterized by an insistence upon the existence of universal values and truths. His fiction at first appears deceptively simple; the plots involve journeys or itineraries, and his narrators avoid bitter tirades about politics and religion. Djaout's work stands out within the scope of recent Algerian fiction because of its originality, sincerity, and humanist values.

In *The Last Summer of Reason*, first there comes the frighteningly hypnotic sermon, monotheism unto monolatry in a mere four pages. Fire and brimstone fulminating today from the pulpits of countless mosques just as it once did at witch burnings and entreaties to join the Crusade, and still does from the pulpits of countless revival tents in the religioeconomic deserts of fundamentalism. The sermon is all the more frightening because it starts with reasonable assumptions and ends in apoplexy -- as does any conduct system in the hands of monolaters. The object of the sermon is, yes, the sinner wavering from the True Path; but more: the Self in both its manifestations: the urge to be individual, and the proclivity to ornament. Both, say the sermon, stray one's mind from the True Vision of God.

Or to rephrase that: (1) Our Truth. (2) Our Vision. (3) Our God. Water this trinity from a pulpit and watch the potted death plants grow. The history books are littered with the shards of the broken pots the plants outgrew.

The year is 1992. Boualem Yekker lives in a revivalist version of *1984*. The usual alpha males of society dominate Boualem's with a governance that prospers as a creosote plant prospers, poisoning everything around itself because that is the only way it knows how to survive. But Boualem is no mouse hiding behind go-along-with-it conformity. He is a bookseller -- a knowledge dispenser -- amid an ethos trying to exterminate knowledge. *The Last Summer of Reason* is the story of his progress: not of his life, but of his soul.

Tahar Djaout was a good enough writer to borrow but not mimic. His is a *1984* of religious fanaticism in Algeria. He daubs just enough of the right taints to give you the idea: "VBs" (Vigilant Brothers) in lieu of the Thought Police; "Reign of Equity" in lieu of Big Brother -- without overdoing it on the colors. Convincing details convey just how far the insanity of *a-priori* can go when men of the same *priori* try to outdo each other in interpretive fervor: In Boualem's world,
sparing tires are banned because God's will alone ordains whether you should or should not get to
your destination. Husbands who "serve" their wives must enter the bed right foot first so to be one
step ahead of the Devil. Why are priests so preoccupied with other men's sexual styles?

Resist the urge to pick on bearded mullahs in all this. Fear of Satan is fear of Self and Self is not of
one time or one place. The Great Cultural Revolution brandished the Little Red Book. The Reign of
Terror in France renamed the months to absurdities like "Brumière" because February was the
month of fog and mist. The saffron fanatics of India today burn Christians alive in their jeeps.

Buddhist monks fan the populace of Sri Lanka, and therefore the politicians, into flames of an
ethnic war; and in fact have been doing so for 2,200 years. Point no fingers at the mindset that
forces women to wear burqas until you've had a look at what centuries of priests have dreamed up
for nuns. The double-standard misogyny at a party-frat beer bust or the locker room at The Citadel
is little different from the misogyny that sliced off the breasts of Saint Anne. The mullahs are not
new at this, just an easy diversion from Christianity's own historical record. A man who wants to
kill will create his cause first and later call it just. His insecure followers will pave the road to truth
with body counts, and the aides-de-camp of political correctness will turn nuisances of corporals
into colonels of cruelty.

Algeria and the Arab lands differ in this: The desert is a spirit of place. It is about danger,
uncertainty, colorlessness, life on a thread, an immense tremor of the sky spawning the immense
tremble of the wind. It is above all irrational, and so does it mold minds. After the mind so made,
comes history.

Over the last half-century, extreme reactions to extreme provocation -- from overlords, moneylords,
landlords and classlords -- became brokendream business plans in Dhaka, Kuala Lumpur, Karachi
and Riyadh, to name but a few. Algeria's struggle for liberation from the "4-lords" of France lasted
from 1954 to 1962. The victory resulted first in a flirt with socialism; then during the 1980s a
romance with privatization and liberalization; and in 1989 an arranged marriage with multiparty
democracy.

The clandestine tryst, however, was with the veil: Arabization. A political program to impose
Arabic and Islamic cultural values on a land made of many other values besides Arab and Islam.
Off Djaout's pen, this political setting was shaped into a religious 1984 that became this novel.

The values, though, resisted, and a decade-long civil war resulted. One value was pre-Islamic
Berber maraboutism -- venerating marabouts or saintly mystics and teachers who supposedly
possess special spiritual powers. Maraboutism gave rise to secret brotherhoods with their own
rituals and rites. It appealed to simpler folk who lacked the education to assimilate the complex
ideas and linguistic delicacies of the Qur'an. Because of maraboutism's disdain for authority,
Islamists tried to restrict its influence. Conservative Muslims found themselves clashing with
maraboutists, left-wing students, and emancipated women's groups, all more or less at once. The
result was extreme defensiveness and an equally extreme lash-out in consequence. By 1990 the
power of the pulpit had proved stronger than the press and the ballot and fundamentalist imams
(prayer leaders) gained control of Algeria's major mosques.

In the post-1990 tumult Tahar Djaout wrote two searing novels: Les vigiles (Early Warning Signs of
an Illness) in 1990 and The Last Summer of Reason in 1992-93. Professor Patricia Geesey of the
University of North Florida aptly sums up the Algerian literary climate of his time:

"Algerian writers consciously attempt to transcend basic political references as well as the
immediate need simply to bear witness to current events, in order to engage the reader in a
compelling exchange. Recent Algerian novels do not so much directly and concretely speak to
current political and social issues in Algeria as evoke an atmosphere of urgency, terror, and
confusing contradictions in which the very sacredness and dignity of human life are callously
discarded. .... By focusing on creating a portrait of a society in which a reign of terror is suggested
by the climate of bureaucratic confusion, nearly anonymous violence, and physical constriction,
many Algerian novelists transcend a 'reactive' impulse by creating works of fiction that are hauntingly effective in making the reader feel the consequences of living under siege."

Tahar to a "T". The Last Summer of Reason is less a novel than a flow-path, for there is no "plot" in the linear form of A B C and D: He gets killed/married/the new job/rides off into the sunset. The first six chapters thread a linear line: Yekker drives a road, reflects disconsolately in his bookshop with his only friend Ali Elbouliga, strums a mandolin that can no longer be publicly played (aside from the unGodliness of pleasure there is the matter of the instrument's obscene resemblance to a woman's belly). He reminisces about a family vacation amid nature, endures a stoning by neighborhood children and reflects on the difference between himself, "... who had read some thousand books or more from Plato to Kawabata, by way of Mohammed Iqbal, Kazteb, Yacine, Octavio Paz, and Kafka," and the mullah entitle Vizier of Reflection, who got his post by, "answer[ing] that he forbade himself any reading other than the Holy Book; that novels, essays, and other perverse ramblings were nothing but fancy notions he disdained and whose accounts he would settle on the day that the Almighty, keeper of the secret of hierarchies, gave him the opportunity."

The next chapter, "The nocturnal tribunal," is the book's turning point. It describes a police blockade in which Boualem is taken prisoner and discovers that his own son is one of his accusers. In a moment of madness, Boualem grabs his son's gun and kills him, and ... wakes up from the nightmare. Literal, yes; symbolic the more, for Boualem thereafter is not the same.

At this point, save for two instances, the narrative slips away from a continuum of narrated events into a continuum of awarenesses that meanders over vast segments of mental and literary landscape, all in the few cubic centimeters of Yekker's brain which link metaphysics with his reference points in memory. Both those instances are death threats, one friendly -- an appeal to relinquish his willfulness before it is too late -- and the other -- well, what do you expect from a death threat?

The end is not the ghastly mangling of an all-but-anonymous Mr. K, or the thousands of defenseless Algerian men, women and children whose throats were slit by antigovernment fanatics all across the 1990s, but a 17-page dreamday-become-real and realday-become-dream. It disconnects Boualem Yekker from the incongruity of an overheated belief system which extols the beauty of nature as evidence of the divine while turning that divinity into a furion of vengeance and punishment; and reconnects him with what humanity is before all else: the source of a will to be one's own creator:

"It is true that a single lifetime is too short to accomplish all that you want. There are so many deformities you would like to correct, so many events you would like to approach from another angle, so many trails you would like to cover over, so many wounds or affronts you would like to erase: at least one other life is needed to do this .... he conjures images and memories that seem to come from so far away, from a time immemorial. To reach him they snake in and out between endless summers, miles and miles of icy winds, valleys, rivers, mountains. Beautiful and nostalgic music, music sad enough to make you weep, music from the magic and merciless time in which birth and death, separation and reunion are wedded .... You feel like blocking every exit of the universe so that time will remain your prisoner, so that the whirlwind that pulls you to your death will be stopped."

What Tahar started as a story he ends as an exile's soliloquy on the metaphysics of what it means to be human, what it means to know a reason, what it does to see a bird fly, the sun set. Boualem Yekker merges the poet he thinks he is into the poet he really is:

Only dreaming is still allowed, to those who know how to find refuge in themselves. It is the only autonomous area that keep the prison wards at a distance. And so, for the lack of having a life, Boualem Yekker dreams. He replaces people with ghosts. He replaces the dwarfed history [of the
Reign of Equity] limping along in its little shoes with the grandiloquent myth that lifts the world's wings with the breath of poetry.

On that song of his soul, self becomes nil. Religions are about self; spirituality is about self; transcendence -- epiphany, moksha, nirvana -- is about the nil.

Tahar had a lovely, moving, evocative style. He slips in and out of omniscience, one page the narrator, another the clairvoyant, thence to reporter, then the mystic whose seed of conditionals -- the woulds and coulds of faith and faith not -- all of these rake Boualem Yekker across the velvet verbs of his soul. He resists the urge to smirk at totalitarianism's silliness. Instead he inks with a delicate brush: "Weather forecasts have been banned from television and no newspaper is authorized to publish them," one character announces, "... for how can one argue and quibble over patterns known only to God."

Inevitably, however, he reaches a point where conviction -- in both senses of the word -- overtakes the ability to narrate and the narrative drive slips away into an extended paean of grief:

_to go through life as you swim through a current: the water foams and roils unendingly, forbidding any face to become fixed, any memory to linger. You reach the other shore completely destitute, a memory in pain the only relic of your crossing._

Page after page after page of this. Greatness on those pages, compassion, understanding, lyricism. Seen with eyes of steel and said with a tongue of silver. Shortly after writing these words in 1993, Tahar Djaout was assassinated by a man who admitted acting on behalf of religious militants.

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Again Professor Geesey: "Out of the nearly one dozen Algerian novels in French that have been published since early 1991, four novels in particular share a common thread: the centrality of the human body. The body is omnipresent in much recent fiction from Algeria. The very real threat of horrible violence done to the body is clearly a source for the corporeal theme in Algerian writing; bodies at risk of decapitation, emasculation, shooting, bombing, stabbing, rape, or incarceration are recurring images. For virtually all the novels published since the civil crisis began, the metaphor of Algeria the nation as a body suffering from illness, cancer, or gangrene also manifests the authors' anxiety about the 'health' of the nation and its citizens."

The days will vanish that seemed so pure. Then the ache begins at how much was lost. Expectations drain each moment of its life while the eye seeks desperately for the better. When the better arrives, we find it is a future that's already been trampled. Then our words have to explain why. Time knowingly watches us as we plan the next ruse. _March 2002_

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