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**Michael Kleeberg**  
**The Crying Animal**  
**Lebanese Travelogue**

**Translated by Isabel Cole**

[Extract referring to the pp. 30-42 in the German text]

**His eyes are the first thing:** into the room comes a pair of eyes surrounded by a person, rather than a stranger with a face that has certain features one notices little by little. Two dark wells, cisterns, springs rather, not pitch-black like Picasso's, but warm dark brown, surrounded by a nimbus of laughter-lines which the troubled wrinkled brow, the heavy, sorrowful brown lids and the tear-sacs of experience counterbalance, forestalling the impression of a frivolously cheerful man. I interpret the combination of contradictory wrinkles and dark sockets – harboring equally dark eyes which seem even larger than they are – as humor and melancholy, and the two together amount to self-irony. When he comes toward me (we know each other only from photos), holds out his hand, takes mine, placing his left hand over it protectively as if to shield it, it is clear and conclusive that we will like each other. His big curved nose lends his appearance something aristocratic, dynastic. Arguing against that is the missing occiput: where one expects a bulge the bare skull drops straight to the nape as a grooved precipice; with its garland of hair it calls to mind a slip-on clown mask. A combination of *clown blanc* and *Auguste*. The salt-and-pepper moustache looks rustic when Abbas is tired, but when he is holding forth or wearing his brown Borsalino it gives him the appearance of an old Spanish grandee or a Latin American governor. He laughs readily and often, seeming to beam from the crow's feet rather than from the eyes themselves, which remain in melancholy shadow. His eyes can also glitter maliciously, a bit diabolically, without being sinister, more jack-in-the-box than Satan. *Malin* is the French word for it. I perceive his strong, black-haired, quite small hands as paternally tender (an association with my father's hairy hands – yet Abbas' hands are not raised to strike, but only, fluttering, gliding, opening and closing, drumming, scratching, propping, to gesticulate. The fingernails are short, spatulate, not chewed but cut straight across like toenails, sometimes with a fine black rim, a sure sign of the bachelor. Women in the house immediately point out such things and keep you from imagining, as men typically do, that the rims are a part of you like pigments or liver spots and thus forgetting to get rid of them. His ears are large and shapely, but neither they nor the mouth (though much in use, as Abbas is prone to digressive explaining and lecturing) are crucial to the stamp of this face, rather the eyes, though even open they often seem to slumber, to dream, to look into the beyond.

In conversation, when clarifying a thought or a feeling, drawing a comparison, expressing an opinion, he often injects the expression: *s'il est possible*, rather than, more idiomatically French: *pour ainsi dire* (so to speak). Neither does he say: *s'il est possible de dire ainsi* (if it's possible to put it like that), but merely: if it is possible. That removes the phrase from its hackneyed banality and lends every thought he ends that way a kind of self-amazed proviso calling not only himself but reality into question, or rather a relativization ex post facto. It is also a mark of his discretion and modesty, that is, his aversion to pedantry and insistence, that he qualifies his statements with this "if it is possible" or puts them in the quotation marks of heartfelt courtesy. And also the astonishment and caution of the poet, the language artist in the face of reality: look at that, or: look at all that's actually possible, contrary to logic and expectation. For this "if it is possible" expresses nothing other than: of course it is possible.

Another expression, often used in sole reply: *Je comprends*. Here the difference in modulation makes clear its given meaning beyond "I understand": It doesn't matter; I don't care; I sympathize with that; I don't sympathize with that; I'm disappointed; I can understand your feelings; I take your meaning; I don't understand what you mean, but I'm thinking about it; I get it, you don't need to go on; All right, we don't have to talk about me, that's irrelevant; I need to think it over to reach a conclusion about what you're saying and come up with a reply, etc. The time his interlocutor needs to figure out how to interpret this "I understand" enables Abbas to distance himself from the problem, the issue, the other, himself.

#### IMAGES OF ABBAS:

Abbas, having slid down from the sofa, leaning against it with jacket askew, then crawling around on all fours to play with Paula on eye level. Abbas, eyes fixed on Paula, placing his left palm on the back of his right hand, executing wave movements with the double hand and indicating beating wings with the two outstretched thumbs: a migrating crane. The child watches wide-eyed. She practices the complicated maneuver for weeks. On the evening of our first reading in the Goethe Institute she masters it and crows up at the podium from the first row: "Abbas! Look!" And Abbas interrupts himself to watch her demonstration.

Abbas clowning around in the Amphitheater of Byblos for a photo by Leslie, then striking a declamatory pose: suddenly he is 2500 years old, straight out of a play by Aristophanes.

Abbas – on the way back to Ehden, Rachid calls Leslie, behind the wheel, to ask whether we've reached the plain again all right – leaning over and crowing into the phone: "Rachid, your car is ugly and uncomfortable compared with this splendid Cadillac here."

Abbas, at the Wissenschaftskolleg, listening to Adonis' encomium and Darwish's speech without taking notes, but interrupting to ask questions; then, a few days later, his article for *As-Safir*: a brilliant synopsis, as if he'd had a recording, an equally brilliant analysis of the substance. His absent-mindedness, blinding one to his capacity to concentrate, to listen attentively.

In the Brecht House, when we're about to leave and he suddenly asks whether they couldn't open the enormous wardrobe. Then he smilingly regards the collarless shirts and working-class jackets which, with their first-class material and workmanship (if I remember correctly, Brecht had them made by a Zurich tailor), have weathered fifty years like a single day. It haunts Abbas that Brecht chose his final domicile next to the graveyard where he wished to be buried, so that when the time came he would only have to climb over the fence, so to speak. For a long time he gazes over at it from the winter garden of Weigel's apartment. For a long time, too, he stood at Hegel's homely gravestone until I had the awkward sense that he was praying at the grave of a friend or relative I never knew, making me for the moment out of place. He does not linger over the books, but at the poet's bed he knows his man: the monastic cell, the narrow bed, like a child's, elitism, exclusivity, asensuality, asceticism, the lifetime bier, the need for solitude, purity, the arrogance, repellant, touching.

Driving back to Beirut one evening he leans his head back over the seat, dreamily, appreciatively melancholy, and shuts his eyes when a song by Oum Kalsoum (he pronounces the name "Oom-Kooltoom"). "How I used to listen to her, in the old days. At her concerts she sang only one single song, for two whole hours... One long variation on lamentation and the pain of existence." For me, with my own old songs of longing, these inscrutable sounds are an indistinct glimpse into a garden that is closed to me: Abbas' youth.

In the Hamburger Bahnhof Museum his intent, alert, enthusiastic, knowledgeable interest in Anselm Kiefer. Our interest wanes at all the other banally pompous installations, and as we pass the fifth group of visitors gathered in reverently strained cathedral silence in a room with green barbershop neon tubes and Ikea chairs stationed in the corners, he bursts out in loud and hearty laughter: "This art's emperor has no clothes, that's comical, not tragic, but the way the people refuse to believe what they see, that's enough to make you laugh in despair!" A pale woman turns around and hisses at us like an angry snake. Then she sees the

Arab, and the whole hard-learned veneer of politically correct tolerance slips from her disintegrating glare.

Abbas in conversation with close friends: he takes them into his aura, profound intimacy, radiant warmth. Abbas with strangers: his gaze slightly in-turned, his attitude between morose and modest, self-effacing, not wanting to inconvenience anyone, but all eyes and ears to assess and appraise. Abbas in his circle of friends: like a triton, a demigod of the Mediterranean, sybaritic, drifting on the waves of laughter with his head flung back, laughing loudest when his leg is pulled. Abbas irritated: the same laughing eyes, but the knife of language suddenly snaps open. A quick cut suffices. If the troublemaker remains, or is too thick-skinned to take notice, aversion follows, weariness, distraction.

Like many intellectuals, once he has come to regard certain thoughts and statements as valid and important (presumably after long reflection, soul-searching and dialectical probing), he has the tendency to repeat them on a regular basis, without minding, and perhaps without remembering, that he already formulated them the same way yesterday, the day before, and in an article. Perhaps, too, this reflects melancholy at the fact that correct realizations can be expressed a thousand times without having any consequences in reality.

Each new meeting: the slightly cocked head, the maliciously glittering eyes, the nimbus, the exclamation of joyful surprise, the smile, the outspread hands, the soothing way he pats your arms as he kisses you in greeting. *Ça va?*

His aversion to long leave-takings, ceremonies, sentimentalities: meet eyes, say goodbye, turn away, the raised hand both salute and defensive gesture, then nothing but his coattails, still flapping from his turn.

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**Rachid Daif, writer and literature professor** at the state university, sits in an armchair in Abbas' office. No sooner have we been introduced than he invites us to his house in the mountains on Saturday. After our coffee he suggests that we all drive to the center of the city in his car to continue our conversation there. Rachid is a head taller than Abbas but resembles him at first glance, perhaps because of the sparse hair, the bald pate, the handsome, sorrowfully tender thinkers' faces. The two have something Pat-and-Patachon-, Laurel-and-Hardy-like, and there are moments when I think they cultivate it. A pair of woebegone clowns from a Beckett comedy. They seem to be improvising, but they know their lines in their sleep.

The impression of profound intimacy between them. Abbas is the city-dweller, with his southern elegance, while Rachid has the clothing and manner of the English gentleman farmer on a jaunt to the city from his estate, caricatured more than incarnated (*avec les moyens du bord*, incidentally: the life of the gentry can't be lived on a Lebanese professor's salary).

During the ride Rachid goes into such raptures about his car, a Mitsubishi Pajero 4wd, that although I meet his eyes several times to find the glitter of malicious or perhaps mad mischief, I get out of the car still uncertain whether he isn't just a rather eccentric poser. "This divine automobile is ideal for the mountains up where I live, where we had snow on the ground until just a few days ago. That's where the four-wheel-drive comes into its own. I don't think there's a car in the world more beautiful than mine. Just look at the workmanship. Don't you agree? This hard grainy plastic here!" He knocks on the ceiling. Then in a suddenly disillusioned tone: "You don't agree, do you?" Giving me a penetrating look. And then utterly dashed, with a hint of reproach in his voice: "You don't like my car at all, do you? Go ahead and say so, I can deal with honesty..."

We are crossing a bullet-ridden stretch along the former line of demarcation; an extremely slender thirty-story high-rise with gaping windows (the shell built before the war, never completed) rears up like a charred index finger. Fallow land, crisscrossed by urban freeways, underpasses, in between a few once-beautiful Ottoman villas with bullet-holes in their facades like the scars of smallpox or leprosy. Next to them new buildings from after the war.

The pedestrian zone is an oasis of postmodern urbanity in international business-class style for a hundred yards around the Place de l'Etoile, ochre-yellow restored buildings from the Mandate Period, cafés, restaurants, luxury boutiques, arcades, down one side street a view of excavation sites: Roman, some Phoenician.

It all reminds me of Milan or Lugano, I say, meaning it very much as a compliment. Rachid is in full agreement, Abbas not at all.

There is a strong military presence at the Etoile, with the Parliament and the café we are heading for. Along the street, before/after showcases display the work of the Solidere company which is renewing the city center. The little that has been completed so far is an unquestionable success, and, just as indisputably, the district is a welcome reserve of relaxation for people with children.

The cries of muezzins ring out from three or four mosques close at hand, break against the facades and rush back and over one another.

Then, in competition, church bells ring out from several different directions. Rachid and Abbas grimace. I close my eyes. Knowing perfectly well that everyone here is only allowed to criticize his own religion, I listen to their exchange: Can you stand that? That's not music, that's not singing! Five times a day the *appel à la prière*, on Fridays, what's more, there's the Imam's speech on moral, religious, political issues blaring out from the loudspeakers from every single mosque. Intolerable! And what if I don't want to hear it, what if I take this screeching as an affront? That doesn't bother them: *Le ciel appartient à Dieu*, so the message is unabashedly pronounced into open space, and everyone has to put up with it. And the bells!

When I ask what the Imam talks about, I learn that the political speeches are often tirades of hatred against Israel: *Il n'y a pas de nuances*.

Rachid wrinkles his nose, turns to me and points at Abbas. "He's an atheistic Shiite. But I'm an atheistic Christian *à la libanaise*."

Over coffee and orange juice, tea and pistachios, Abbas and Rachid give a lesson in applied dialectics.

The first dispute sparked by the competition between bells and muezzin: Has the Islamicization of the Orient reached, or passed, its zenith? Abbas thinks it has, for example Iran, the Islamic political model has run itself into the ground as a vision for the future, just as socialism did in its day.

Rachid, however, believes that Islam will grow increasingly radical over the long term: "The collapse of the Soviet Union was a catastrophe, you know? The models for the laicist Orientals were 1789 and 1917 – now they're left with nothing. Recently at the university – I'm shocked! – I was supposed to tell first-year students something about the USSR. They no longer knew what it was! They no longer know! More and more women students at my lectures are wearing veils. The children of militant Communists, my own friends, and they're practicing Muslims!"

"Those are the death throes of a desperate flight into religion," says Abbas.

Another point of dissent regards literature. As a poetic work, is the Koran an original masterpiece, created out of itself, as it were (Abbas), or does it build continuously upon the achievements of pre-Koranic poetry (Rachid)? Already in Berlin my conversations with Abbas recalled to me the intellectual, cultural heights the Arabs had reached in the Middle Ages. It is the depth of the fall, brought home to them by memory kept alive (and sometimes slipping into the mythical), the depth of the fall from yesterday's greatness to today's

ignominy (so they see it) which produces this underlying mood of injury in the “man on the street” as in the intellectual who knows whereof he speaks.

The next bone of contention: the rebuilding of the city center. Abbas: “Look around you, it’s Disneyland, purely an entertainment district. No one lives here, hardly anyone works here, it’s much too expensive – what’s more, the former property owners were all dispossessed as cool as you please. The whole district is just for tourists, a buffer between east and west.” I’m reminded of the time we visited the new Potsdamer Platz in Berlin. “This used to be the center of the city, the souks, the Place des Martyrs, poor and rich, young and old all met and LIVED here!”

He goes so far as to condemn the highways which make it easy to reach the center from the outskirts (you can tell he’s not a driver himself – they must be grateful).

You have to work your way through a city, he says, from outside to inside, finally reaching its heart.

Rachid: “Without Solidere there would be no excavations, no order, just fields of rubble like before. Anyway, this isn’t an entertainment district, it’s a place where people work. And it looks good. The craftsmanship is fine, clean, with a sense of aesthetics. It’s a windfall. And look around you: The people accept it!”

Abbas spits out a pistachio shell. Rachid stares at him triumphantly. “So you hate the capitalists? *Mais l’argent est plus intelligent que la pauvreté!* Money is wiser than poverty.”

Back next to the shrouded opera house, in the parking lot which supposed to become a shopping mall, Rachid pokes me and glances at Abbas: “He’s a poet, you see,” he says disparagingly, then points at his cell phone: “Isn’t it beautiful? It fits in your hand like the hand of a friend, the polished aluminum gleams faintly like the moon in the mountains. And all the things it does in so little space: it connects people with each other, everywhere, at any time, it acts as an alarm clock, a notebook, an address book. *Ça, c’est la poésie moderne! La technologie. C’est mieux que tous les poèmes...* That’s modern poetry as I understand it. Technology. Not what your friend here cooks up.”

Abbas grins: “Why don’t you unlock your ugly little Japanese car so we can get out of here?”

[Extract referring to the pp. 113-121 in the German text]

**Instead I engage Mrs. Assaf in conversation**, hoping to be told her story, her stories. Her love of her husband, clearly forged in the conflagrations of the war, the fact that the two of them have worked together for decades, the beautiful youthful faces aged by time and suffering, his tender patriarchal tear-sacs, her wilted young girl's features, the novel-like quality of a wartime relationship (I think of *Casablanca*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*), the easy mental leap into mythical realms – Philemon and Baucis or Adonis and Astarte, perhaps, too, Jaakob and Rahel or, if names mean anything, Jussuf and Suleika – all that makes me immensely curious, but, I realize, it is a curiosity with two sides: the bloodhound in me scents “material”, and at everything Ursula Assaf tells me it develops, tests, rejects, combines – images, storylines, narrative concepts, perspectives, plots, tones...

When the word war is first mentioned the skin of her face tautens slightly as if I had touched on a tragedy in the family, the death of a child, as if the delicate scar tissue that has grown over the pain were tearing open again.

“One shouldn't talk about it,” she says, fighting back tears, “otherwise it all comes back again.” And when I mention faith: “Being a Christian doesn't help against the fear at all, at most maybe afterwards, to forgive.”

How sobering the first part of the sentence sounds from her lips – though perhaps it's only my sentimentality, hoping for something different – and how very much the “maybe”, set apart slightly from the other words, relativizes all hope for a more peaceful future.

Still, she adds: “Before the war the Lebanese lived in the ghettos of their religious affiliation and were receptive to hate propaganda. Today they're more open – more Lebanese.”

That tallies with what Abbas told me: that only the experience of the war made many Moslems and leftists appreciate the state of Lebanon as a thing worth defending –once it came within a hair's breadth of ceasing to exist, and now that it exists as anything but a sovereign state.

We jump from one time to another, from one episode to the next, from one memory to the following, contrasting one. And all the while I sort things in my head as we go along, putting chronology and logic into the story, first to comprehend it, then to decide for myself where the main emphases lie, at what point I would have to begin, from there reaching

forward and backward in great arcs, creating a tension, illustrating a development and capturing not only the tragedy of passing time but the timelessness and the eternal present of the epiphanic moment.

Her story begins in Duisburg, in Duisburg before and during the war, and it's already half a novel for me to picture her girlish face in the Ruhrort harbor district, in Meiderich among the dock cranes, the blast furnaces, the bomb craters. She met Assaf in the sixties in Freiburg, where she was studying and he, having gotten his degree in Strasbourg, gave language classes. At the encounter between the diaphanous Oriental Studies student and the Oriental faun: Warning, cliché, warning, kitsch! Especially given that he had studied theology and, if I understood correctly, was already an ordained Maronite priest. In the past that would not have been a problem, because the Maronites had no requirement of celibacy, and Assaf told me on one occasion: "That's much more sensible, of course. In our church experienced fathers of families become priests, people who can offer advice from their own experience."

But ever since the Maronites' voluntary submission to Rome, the Vatican, though officially recognizing the statutes of the Maronite church, has sawed away at its practice, evidently managing to forbid single priests to marry, although already-married men can become priests. Whatever the case, there must have been a long tug-of-war before the two were able to marry, as Mrs. Assaf tells me that they came to Lebanon shortly after their wedding, and that was already 1974, a year before the outbreak of civil war.

One year of happiness and shared labors in this Switzerland of the Orient, I picture to myself, Gibran and poetry and sun and Arcadia and then fifteen years of mortal fear, every single day.

Why had Jussuf Assaf kept the Goethe Institute open for years, the only remaining international cultural institute, at the risk of his life, and long after all the Germans had cleared off? Why at the risk of dying and leaving his wife all alone? From idealism? From love of culture? From the sense of duty he had come to value in Germany? One thing should be said about the "secondary values", such as the sense of duty, which have dropped out of favor in these parts ever since the attacks on Helmut Schmidt. God preserve us and the world from the primary German virtues, above all idealism in all its fanatical forms! Yet secondary virtues, gentlemen, serve not only to run a concentration camp, but also to keep a Goethe Institute open in wartime.

"Did he ever get any thanks for it?" I ask Mrs. Assaf. She gives me a fathomless look in which the clear water of irony covers the dregs of disdain, shrugs her shoulders and shakes her head. (When I say to Stehle later on: "If I understand anything about what the Order of the

Federal Republic of Germany means, Assaf really ought to have gotten one long ago,” he tells me that at his instigation Assaf will at least be honored with a medal and ceremony by the Goethe Institute when he retires next year, though of course it will not improve his extremely modest pension – of course “native” employees of the Goethe Institute are not paid according to the German statutory salary scale, but receive a standard local salary in the local currency, which in Lebanon has been devalued by inflation.)

“The mortal fear every day. Will he come home, won’t he? Is he stuck? Did something happen to him on his way? Sometimes he was trapped in West Beirut for two weeks at a time without any way of contacting me. Not knowing what the matter is...,” she says without finishing the sentence, but the silence reverberates. The greying hair, a measure of the hours spent waiting, holding out.

I think of the story he told: how, coming from Jounieh, he parks his car in an open shipping container in the Beirut harbor so it won’t be destroyed by the shelling, how he has himself chauffeured across the green line, the line of battle, in an armored car, just to unlock the doors of this institute next to the lighthouse so that a handful of Lebanese can go on learning the language of Goethe.

She tells of the day when, driving back down the expressway to Jounieh, he was forced to stop at one of the countless roadblocks and checkpoints, how the militiamen dragged him out of the car, how they beat him....

I see: how they slapped him, flinging his black- or already grey-maned head back and forth, how they boxed his ears until they deafened him, how they kicked him in the stomach and the testicles, bringing him to his knees, how they hit him in the liver and the spleen, how they worked him over, lying there, with kicks from their dusty army boots, how he tried to shield his face with his grazed hands. How they spat on him, how they cleaned out his car, cutting everything to pieces with their knives, tearing out the ceiling panels, all the while laughing and smoking and spitting on him. How one saw the wedding ring on his finger and tried to tear it off, nearly slipping the joint out of the socket, then managed to twist it off after all, with curses and insults, and put it in his pocket. How the blood ran down his forehead and his temples in dusty red streaks and rivulets and out of his mouth with its knocked-in teeth and bitten tongue. How they let him crawl away and fired one more burst next to him, cracking the asphalt and making sharp pebbles hail down on him.

What they could have demanded from him. What they could have forced him to do. What they might have made him say...

“He was a different man when he came home,” said his wife. “It took him a long time, months, to come to terms with it.”

But why did they do that to themselves, I ask. She could have gone back to Germany, and he could have gone with her.

“Jussuf always gets so homesick. He can never stand being out of the country for long.”

Of course the two of them were in Germany now and then, he only once or twice, she more often, whenever there was a chance to leave the country, but at some point she always had to go back to him, and as one never knew whether it would be possible to enter the country, she usually preferred to stay with him.

“One time,” she says, “when the rest of Lebanon was closed off, there was a short time when it was permitted to leave the country from the harbor of Jounieh, which is really nothing but a marina. More than a thousand people were waiting on the mole to get out, but there were only a few small, open launches.”

She stood in line as well; she had promised to bring along the two small children of a friend who had already gotten out and could no longer return for them.

They sailed for twelve hours through the night across the sea to Cyprus, standing. Twelve hours standing through the darkness amidst the people who stood pressed so close together on the overfilled boat that they kept each other from falling, sinking to the ground, the children threw up, panic broke out, the captain in his cabin was drunk, bellowing, babbling. At dawn they reached the Cypriot coast.

These are film scenes in my head, not literary ones.

Pain, fear, horror, we know, make people mute. Language ends some time before what is rightly called the “unspeakable” and only begins again a while later. And in a much later conversation when one must give a form, a beginning, an end to the unspeakable, which elicits at most animal sounds from us, all that remains, the most humane means of transport because it is the easiest, is the anecdote...

The next episode Mrs. Assaf relates to me is Hollywood material as well: One evening during the war a piano recital was held in Jounieh. A sudden din, shaking, shocks: a bombing raid on the harbor. Everyone fled into the cellar and cowered there for four hours. When everything seemed quiet again, the boldest climbed back out, and the others followed one by one. One of the first to emerge was the pianist. She dusted off her dress, sat back down at the piano and went on playing exactly where she had been interrupted.

I want to practice an archaeology of the skin, in this land of excavations and silted-over, want to explore more deeply how this face acquired the folds and wrinkles, the fine lines and crow's feet, what bowed the man's once-powerful back and what at moments makes his eyes over the tender tear-sacs so profoundly weary.

Now she tells me how she tried to get back into the war zone of Lebanon after leaving the country for a stay in Germany. In the airplane she listened to the radio like everyone else, the news. The same old story: heavy fighting for the Beirut airport. The flight is rerouted, heads for an alternative airport, probably Cairo. There the waiting begins. Transit lounge, for hours, one day and one night, one more day. Finally it's announced that an airplane will make the rounds of the region, collecting those few passengers waiting at various airports who must return to Beirut at all costs, despite the danger.

“And I had to! Jussuf was waiting for me at the airport...”

I try to calculate how many days he waited there, barricaded in somewhere, while the machine gun salvos rattled out across the runway.

It was the most terrifying flight she'd ever taken, she tells me. “There were only a handful of people sitting in the big plane. Everyone was afraid, everyone was panicked, everyone was constantly listening to the news, their portable radios pressed to their ears. Even the stewardesses' nerves were so shot that they kept dropping whatever they were carrying in their trembling hands. There was a din and a clatter in the cabin as if the plane were already under fire.”

At some point both of us are weary and drained, she from summoning and telling all these memories, I from listening on several different levels at once. A conversation like that has no dramatic structure and thus no end. At some point it simply peters out... at some point we simply fall silent...