

Translated excerpt

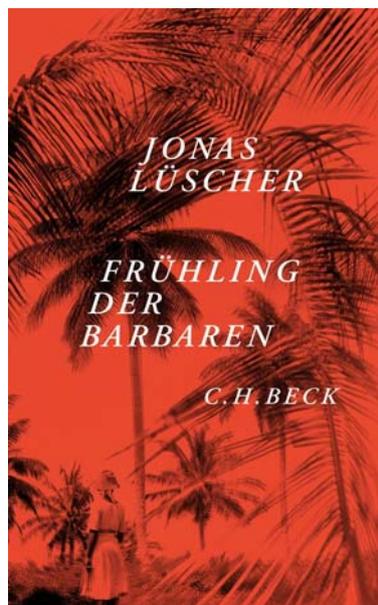
**Jonas Lüscher**  
***Frühling der Barbaren***

C.H.Beck Verlag, München 2013  
ISBN 978-3-406-64694-2

pp. 20-28, 33-36

**Jonas Lüscher**  
***Spring of the barbarians***

Translated by Tom Morrison



(pp. 20–28):

“Item, towards noon I left Tunis in a jeep. One of Slim Malouch’s employees was at the wheel. Saida beside me in the back, her assistant next to the driver. Soon the suburbs of Tunis were fading into the distance, and I enjoyed the drive though the increasingly sparse landscape. Our destination was the oasis of Tshub, where Saida managed another one of her father’s luxury hotels. Saida was discussing the precarious state of the British financial system with her employee. Over the past few days the pound had plunged. Major worries that English guests might stop coming. And indeed the situation did seem disquieting and, in those days especially, confused. Reports of fresh scandals were appearing almost by the day. The true extent of the embroilment of British banks both among themselves and with other institutions on the brink of collapse was only beginning to emerge. Saida and her assistant, who both spoke with great authority and seemed to understand something of the matter, feared the worst. I myself had resolved several days before to pay no more attention to the entire business. I had made a principle of not allowing myself to be worried by opaque affairs beyond my reach and scarcely to be understood in any case, and this principle has served me well up to the present day.

The desert per se is the landscape that perhaps suits me best. The emptiness, the vastness, the arrow-straight road we went racing along. As soon as we left the hilly hinterland behind us and saw the mighty desert stretch out in front of us, I too left everything behind, the noise of the town, the incessant flattery of Slim Malouch, the ever-anxious face of Prodanovic.

The dead camels roused me abruptly from my contemplation of the dunes flying past. The scene we saw less than thirty metres ahead seemed to silence us momentarily as the driver braked sharply and brought the vehicle to a stop. A silver monster of a coach stood on the black ribbon of asphalt, reflecting the desert sun, its side-mirrors sticking

out into the road like elephant's ears. Ten, maybe fifteen, camels were spread about the stationary bus, some lying there on their own, others enmeshed in a ferocious tangle of bony limbs and flaccid humps. The sight of their twisted necks with all the strength drained out of them was obscene. One of the beasts had literally wrapped itself round the twin front axle of the bus. Its unnaturally elongated neck dangled over the hot rubber of the giant tyre, tongue lolling from its mouth between bared yellow teeth, one stiff leg projecting heavenwards between the wheel and the body, its wealed foot bent at a sharp angle. The pressure had proved too much for the beast's body, which was wedged between the two wheels, and intestines were dribbling out onto the road.

A small crowd had gathered round the lifeless bodies. The mood was more than tense. A few green-bereted soldiers in camouflage were trying to calm down five or six agitated Bedouins, several of whom sported weapons likewise. Behind the soldiers stood the driver of the coach, sweating, dressed in a blue short-sleeved shirt, a gaping wound on his forehead, and he was subjecting the camel drivers to a loud stream of invective. Behind the mirrored windows of the bus tourists' faces were visible in outline, some pale and open-mouthed as they stared at the scene, others pressing their faces up to the panes and trying to capture on their memory cards as much of the fiasco as possible so they could provide pictures when telling the story to the folks back home."

Our stroll had meanwhile taken us up to the outer wall, and we veered off to the left along a broad pebbled path that followed the course of the yellow boundary. Preising suddenly began to show signs of life. He gesticulated animatedly and occasionally broke into a skip. "Saida articulated two oaths of a kind," Preising continued, "nobody would have expected to come from her mouth. One in English, one in French, both expressing, when translated literally, the same thing. Then she got out of the car. Her assistant and I followed suit."

Preising and his companions stood behind the open car doors. A fierce heat took possession of their minds. Above the dead camels and red-hot asphalt the air seemed to wobble viscously, as if charting the sound-waves. A trembling visualization of the agitated voices and the enervating lament of a dying camel. Saida asked him to stay close by the car, then strode off resolutely, assistant by her side, towards the scene of the tumult. A single, loud shot pierced the cacophony of voices. Preising saw Saida being pulled to the ground by her assistant, and for his own part leapt fast as he could, slamming the doors behind him, onto the cool leather of the back seat. The muffled cries of horror to be heard from inside the coach merged with the soldiers' shouts. Only the screams of the dying camel had stopped. All weapons were pointed at a man who, concealed behind the others, had put the wailing camel out of its misery with a shot from a rifle placed squarely between its eyes as they stood aghast.

Saida was back on her feet in a flash, patted the dust off her elegant trouser suit and got involved in the discussion. Preising stayed inside the car, following the course of events from a safe distance. In next to no time Saida had taken control of the situation. Out in the desert, Preising noted, she displayed the same abundant self-confidence and inbred authority as on the streets of Tunis.

"It was loud, it was hectic, and it was not without a certain aggressiveness," Preising reported with visible disapprobation. "And it went on and on without the least sign of any agreement being reached. Disputes enjoy a very different status in those parts of the world. And they follow entirely different rules. Never try to intervene. Futile, I promise you, you'll always say the wrong thing. And there's something, I'd almost say, yes, sporting about it. Discussions for the sake of discussions. And never try to say, now let's all calm down, we can settle the matter quite peacefully. The agitation is the real point." He looked at me uneasily for a moment, then continued: "At any rate I at least soon

get tired of that kind of excited argument. Most of the time it gets you nowhere. So I asked the driver to pass me back the copy of the Financial Times lying on the dashboard.

The paper was dominated by one topic, the unexpected return of the financial crisis, and above all the more than precarious economic situation of Britain triggered by the collapse of the Royal Bank of Scotland, in which since the banking crisis government ownership had totalled more than eighty percent. Within twenty-four hours the result was chaos on a national, oh, what am I saying, international, scale because the Lloyds Banking Group, which was government-owned to the tune of seventy percent, subsequently collapsed due to both financial institutes' involvement, seemingly unbeknown to the government, in bad mortgage loans in Bangalore and Malaya, with the result that the economic analysts of leading newspapers were expressing the conviction that the British government would never be able to guarantee the safety of its citizens' savings deposits. These analyses led, logically enough, to an unparalleled run on the island's banks. The paper I was holding showed a picture of a bank in Ilfracombe, a small town well known to me from a cycling tour of the county of Devon in my youth, a place I recalled as a haven of tranquillity, yet compared with this photograph the belligerent crowd and the dead camels I saw through my windscreen presented a veritable scene of peace and harmony. People degenerate into animals when their savings are at stake."

Outside the car the marksman was now delivering a touching performance. He had thrown himself upon the camel, which now was silent, at last, because it was dead, and was lamenting no less loudly and heart-rendingly than the beast had done before him. Then he passed the palms of his hands across the lids with their feminine lashes, closing the wide-set eyes from which all life had faded. He rose with dignity, proceeded to the next carcass, collapsed on top of it, let out a wail then closed the animal's eyes. He repeated this ritual for every camel, taking as

much time as he needed. There was a lump in Preising's throat and he was overcome by profound sadness.

While Preising studied the newspaper the driver had joined the crowd of onlookers, leaving him alone. "A circumstance that suited me very well in that particular moment," Preising said, "because sadness of the kind by which I was overcome begins to feel embarrassing when a stranger is present."

Together with the bus driver Saida's chauffeur was walking round the steel elephant, a professional look on his face as he inspected the battered radiator grille, attempted half-heartedly to nudge the dangling bumper back into place, and together the two men even tweaked the camel's leg pointing so stiffly upward. After a brief exchange with Saida the chauffeur returned. He slumped down behind the wheel of the vehicle, breathing heavily.

"It's not like me at all," said Preising, "to poke my nose into other people's business, but I was so overcome by the caravan driver's sadness and anguish that I felt unable to maintain the appropriate distance and restraint in view of these obtuse events that seemed to me utterly incomprehensible and alien, and so I asked the chauffeur, who spoke excellent French, by the way, to explain the situation to me. It was, he replied, a most unfortunate business, but the man was solely to blame for his misfortune, not without good reason, after all, was the driving of camels along traffic highways strictly prohibited, and the coach driver, coming over that rise, could not have spotted the oncoming herd a second sooner. Saida, he continued, was extremely annoyed. The bus belonged to Ibrahim Malouch, a cousin of Slim Malouch, and the camel owner was unlikely to be insured. The passengers, moreover, residents of Monsieur Malouch's hotel, would now miss their flight home and have blighted memories of their otherwise pleasant sojourn in the oasis of Tshub. However, the most regrettable aspect was that other guests of the hotel would look forward in vain to the pre-booked desert camel tour for which

the deceased beasts were destined, and nobody could say whether alternative arrangements could be made for the camel tours scheduled for the next few days."

Both men now stared out at the road, from which several of the men had begun to drag camels by the legs. The owner of the beasts had planted himself down in the dust and was staring at the scene blankly, the upper part of his body, swathed in white cloth, rocking to and fro.

*Le Pauvre, il est ruiné. Complètement.* Most likely he'll never get back on his feet, the driver remarked. All his camels gone at one stroke. His livelihood. The source of income for all the member of an extended family. *Complètement ruiné.* Preising inquired how much one of those camels was worth. Eleven hundred, perhaps twelve hundred Swiss francs. To be multiplied by thirteen.

Preising did a rough sum in his head. Fourteen, fifteen thousand francs. So this man's livelihood, the existence of an entire family, depended on that amount. He was beside himself.

"There was this man squatting in the dust in front of me and crying over his camels, over his life, over fifteen thousand francs. Fifteen thousand, the same figure Prodanovic once proudly presented to me while we held a press conference on our financial statement. Fifteen thousand francs, that's what I earn from the company. Day for day. Just by holding shares. And that's not including my manager's salary, my other shares, my properties and other sources of income. Fifteen thousand francs a day, and here was a man ruined by the same sum. What stopped me getting out of the car, going over to him and giving him the money to buy new camels with? What stopped me?"

I did not have a clue what stopped him getting out and handing the man the money, but I was sure he would tell me soon enough. Preising always found reasons not to act.

"Two things stopped me," he revealed, "namely Prodanovic and Saida. Would not my hostess view such a gesture as an affront? As inappropriate meddling on my part? Had not the very man on whom I intended to bestow my generosity caused her considerable inconvenience by his careless behaviour? And what kind of impression would I make by rewarding him for it? It was a complicated situation requiring careful consideration. And then I remembered the charity committee meetings, chaired by Prodanovic, during which one percent of our annual profits were allocated to development schemes and arts projects. Every year Prodanovic would refuse to allow even one franc go to Africa. The continent is drowning in our benefaction. Africa is virtually paralyzed by development funds. That continent must pull itself out of the swamp by its own bootstraps. I vaguely recalled, however, that Prodanovic primarily meant sub-Saharan Africa. But didn't that include Tunisia? Would I not paralyze this man with my money? Deprive him of the chance to haul himself up by his own strength, to shoulder his burden and build a future by his own efforts? But one glance at his heaving shoulders was sufficient to grasp that this was a case in which aid was expedient. Regardless of Prodanovic. Even if I risked undermining the authority of my hostess. It would cost me so little and I was in a position to really make a difference. I had reached a decision. Naturally, I didn't have fifteen thousand francs in my wallet, let alone twenty-six thousand Tunisian dinars. I considered asking the man to jot down his account details so I could transfer the sum. But was such a man even likely to have a bank account? Or should I just drive with him to the next camel market and buy him thirteen new camels? But would I be able to pay by credit card at a Tunisian camel market?"

With such questions Preising was wrestling when Saida interrupted. She sat down beside him, apologized curtly for the delay, and told the driver to drive. His mood was subdued as he found himself chauffeured away

from the stranded coach, the dead camels, their unhappy owner by whose fate he remained deeply moved. Before long, however, the expansive date plantations of the oasis of Tshub appeared before his eyes. The wind of the desert was ruffling the dark-green treetops, and from a distance it might have been waves rippling upon the surface of an invigoratingly cold lake.

(pp. 33–36):

And so it was the English teacher Pippa Greyling who initiated Preising into the guest structure of the resort. A procedure on which he commented with a pithy quote about the crystallization of society in the small German spa in which once the Shcherbatskys took the waters.

The bond between Pippa and Preising was the circumstance that neither of them had opted voluntarily to be bit players in the *Thousand and One Nights*. She was there because her son had decided to celebrate his wedding in a Tunisian oasis, and had flown in seventy friends and relatives for this purpose. It was, Pippa reported without masking her irritation, what young couples who worked in the City imagined to be the right kind of wedding. Her son, Marc, and his new wife, Kelly, were therefore at the centre of the large group Preising had already noticed by the poolside. Young people in their late twenties and early thirties. Loud and self-assured. Slim and muscular. The men wore sand-coloured chinos, polo shirts and moccasins, the women tank-tops and tight shorts from which silken, brown-burnt legs projected. Their flip-flopped feet were manicured and soft. Those members of the wedding party who ventured into the water wore either the kind of bathing costumes seen on photographs of the young JFK on the beach at Martha's Vineyard, or else skimpy bikinis that displayed flat tummies to best advantage and justified the necessity of pubic shaving. Even virtually naked they looked like they were in uniform. Preising bumped into small groups of them everywhere

he went. They stood cracking jokes at one of the bars, they would vanish, after kissing each other boisterously and dipping their hands beneath the waistbands of each other's shorts, into their air-conditioned tents, they issued the personnel self-assured orders, they wandered through the palm groves, muttering curses, in search of better reception for their Blackberries, since their salaries were such that they were expected to be reachable at all times and any place. Preising was astonished anyhow that London's financial centre could spare fifty young talents in such days as these. But perhaps, he thought to himself, there was nothing left to salvage, and so they had baled themselves out by coming here. This notion, which Preising found highly amusing, seemed to brighten up Pippa too, but it also elicited a contemptuous sniff he thought, for one dreadful moment, was intended for him, but was then relieved to realize that the brat pack at the south end of the pool was the target.

At the north end, as Pippa put it, the social divide began. It was to there that Kelly's siblings, who were among the guests, had retreated with their children, who in their garish swimwear jumped into the pool indefatigably then climbed back out only to jump back in to the accompaniment of loud squeals and yells, their splashes annoying the mothers by the poolside whose women's magazines already looked rather rumpled. Kelly's brother Willy, whose chest was red from the Tunisian sun, had withdrawn into a big yellow swimming float after several fruitless attempts to fraternize with the City boys. Inside this refuge he was now trying to decide, assisted by several bottles of Heineken, exactly how he ought to feel about the luxury by which he was surrounded, and for which he had to thank solely his sister and his new brother-in-law but would never be able to offer his own family. A feeling of fierce contempt had got him through the first day. The refusal to be ruffled came next. Different world, he thought to himself. A different planet, even. Planet of the apes. They were a bunch of apes, those young people at the other end of the pool. The young ones, he called them to himself. Even if they were all in

his own age group. But what did they know about the real world. He had three children to feed. And he liked his shorts with their tattoo motifs.

"My husband," said Pippa, "only came to the pool once. And stayed just long enough to posit the thesis that the incomes of this generation are visible by the colour of their swimsuit." The more subdued the colours, the more unlikely that their cheques will bounce, he had ruminated. "Sanford's a sociologist," she added apologetically. Actually, Pippa had hoped she might get to know Kelly's parents, whom she barely knew, a little better. But the change of climate from Liverpool to Tshub had ill become Mary and Kenneth Ibbotson, she a housewife and he a member of the works council of a tool manufacturing plant, who now suddenly found themselves the parents of the bride at a quarter-of-a-million-pound wedding and in consequence spent most of their time holed up inside their air-conditioned tent.

"It was," Preising explained, "quite evident that Pippa was dissatisfied. Dissatisfied with her son's choice of profession, with his friends, with the circumstance that this wedding had to take place in a luxury resort in Tunisia. But she bore her dissatisfaction with a cheerful insouciance that matched her friendly personality and keen intelligence. All the same, I could not flout convention to the extent of not congratulating her on her son's marriage. She thanked me with a fleeting, sardonic smile."

"It was I," he continued, "who spoiled the happy mood by asking whether Marc was her only child or whether she had been obliged to go through a number of such nuptial occasions. Marc, she answered, was her only child, or at least the only surviving one. Her older daughter had died three years ago. Not far from the Northern Cape, in the belly of a Hurtigruten cruise ship on which she worked as a librarian. Burnt to a cinder, said Pippa, along with several hundred Scandinavian thrillers and a complete edition of Stendhal set on fire by a faulty fan heater.

The manner in which she spoke of her daughter's death surprised me. Like she might be sitting at a bar relating the tale of how she came by

a particularly impressive scar or lost one finger. But maybe that was what it was. A loss comparable with that of a body part, an amputation carried out as the result of some grotesque accident. For someone like me who never had children," said Preising, "it's hard to imagine what such a loss means."