

Translated excerpt

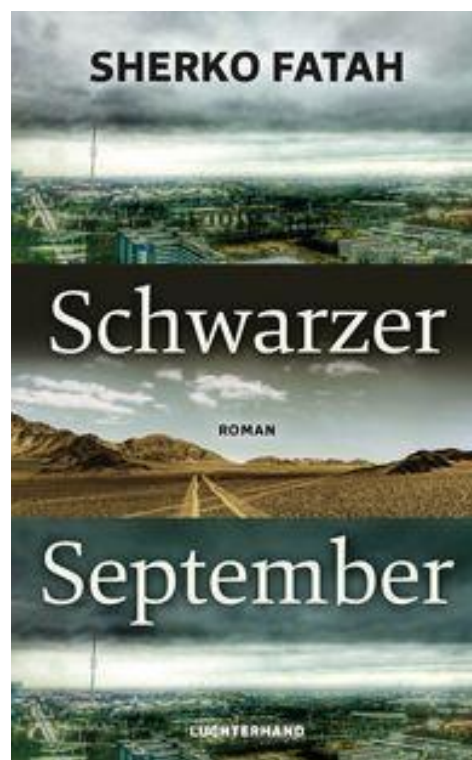
Sherko Fatah
Schwarzer September

Luchterhand Verlag, München 2019
ISBN 978-3-630-87475-3

pp. 11-26

Sherko Fatah
Black September

Translated by Katy Derbyshire



At the end of November 1971, the Jordanian prime minister strode towards the entrance of the Cairo Sheraton Hotel. He was accompanied by his bodyguards. The sky above the city was overcast; matte sunlight fell upon the stones and a light wind rustled the dry leaves of the roadside bushes. From the nearby Nile, the prime minister heard the sputter of small boats' engines as voices and car horns blew in his direction.

The prime minister was a stately man, a good fifty years old. He had an eventful and often enough dangerous life behind him, having served in the British Army during the Second World War, then on the Arabs' side against the Israelis. Now, arrived among the world's powerful men, he already knew many important and self-important players and could call himself a close confidant of his Hashemite king, and a man in whose hands life-or-death decisions often lay. He had just come from a meeting of the Arab League in the city.

Tough months lay behind him, a time in which he had often been expected not only to make decisions but also to defend them against fierce criticism. It was one thing expelling the PLO from Jordan, as in the previous year, and another justifying it to the collected hypocrites of the Arab League, none of whom had lifted a finger.

The prime minister paused a moment, turned around and savored the view of the majestic old river, the dust-grey buildings towering on its banks doing nothing to rob it of its significance. One ought to be like the Nile, he thought, but he immediately shook his head and smiled at himself; now he was turning into a poet on top of it all.

Though others thought differently, he had taken no joy from the bloodbath in the slums of Amman. Expelling the Palestinians from Jordan had been a matter of survival for the state. The many observers from the distance, behind their telephoto lenses and their TV cameras, couldn't understand that. The armed and constantly growing ethnic community formed a majority and would ultimately have destroyed the Jordanian state, even if that was only the aim of their extremist politicians. He had used all means necessary: napalm, tanks, secret police. No one voluntarily nourishes a carbuncle, he was still convinced.

He looked again at the languidly flowing river. He felt no sense of regret, only the strange feeling that all this, the armchairs in the foyer, the long carpets on the marble floor, the

milky sunlight and the sand-colored river, were far removed from him, as though he were remembering them from a distance of years, although it was all close to him at that moment.

His bodyguards had stopped along with him and cast stealthy glances at him when they thought he wouldn't notice. The prime minister thought of his wife, who was dining in the hotel and waiting for him. He moved off again. There were only a few more meters to the entrance and he was looking forward to an afternoon nap. The glass doors were coated in a fine covering of dust, which swallowed up the sunlight. The pillars at the entrance barely radiated heat, and as his bodyguards opened the doors for him, the prime minister's gaze glided across the corners of the foyer, back to reception and down to the smooth marble floor, on which the carpet runners appeared to be floating.

As if he'd forgotten something, he paused, the bodyguards already three strides ahead of him. Like under constraint, he wanted to turn back to the Nile again, perhaps take his leave from it or commit it to memory. But he had not yet turned halfway when four young men appeared out of the nothingness of that quiet late afternoon. One of them stood directly behind him on the steps, opened the glass door and aimed his gun at him, while three others stormed over from the foyer and forced back the bodyguards.

At lightning speed, the prime minister reached for the weapon in his shoulder holster, but his jacket lapel was in the way, his hand no longer reached the fastening only centimetres away, and the many bullets, which he barely heard or felt, threw him to the ground, where his innards seemed to spread out and swallow every sound from outside. He wanted to turn on his back but he no longer registered whether he managed it.

After the shots came a brief hush, the scene frozen, no one moving, not the guests in the foyer nor the hotel staff ducked behind the counters and not even the prime minister's bodyguards. The four men stood around the dead politician, one of them narrowing his eyes to accustom them to the dim indoor light. As though they were the shocked ones, they made no motion at first, only holding their guns out in front of them like handing them over. One of the bodyguards, a Bedouin, began a low wail, turning his palms upwards and tipping his head back. He berated the young men, knowing whose henchmen they were, only falling silent when he saw one of the assassins approaching the body. The man had stuck his gun in his waistband and now stood next to the prime minister. He looked around, eyeing the bodyguards who were still not moving a muscle, stared down at the dead man and then

bent to his knees. The Bedouin couldn't believe his eyes: the man moved forwards on all fours, lowered his head to the floor close to the corpse, and licked the blood seeping out of it in long rivulets off the marble floor. He did it several times so that everyone could see it, and when he finally rose to his feet, his mouth was as red as that of a badly made-up clown. He didn't wipe his lips, instead speaking to those present, monotonously, bereft of passion. He seemed to be satisfied.

If that was really what happened, Victor thought, then it must have been quite a show. The murder must have been so incredibly important to them that they were on top form as they performed it. They forgot neither to state the names of the responsible sub-organizations nor to accuse the prime minister of single-handedly murdering one of their members. And all with the man's blood on the killer's lips.

Victor leaned back in his office chair and folded his arms behind his head. He liked the narrow floor-length window in his office, through which he could look out onto the street, always amazed by how he could never get enough of the masses of passers-by, the slow-moving cars, the donkey carts and porters. This would be my city, he thought, so full of life and different people from all over the place, the right size and close to the sea.

In the next moment he thought of Amos, and thinking of him cast a shadow on everything he saw. That annoyed him. He had planned to ignore the new star at the agency who had arrived from Yemen a few months ago; he had pretended to himself not to care. But his name was on everyone's lips. His new methods, which Victor and many another colleague didn't think much of, made a good impression on some of the upper tiers. We're in the process of finally losing a sheer endless damn war in Southeast Asia, Victor thought, so modern soft methods, understanding, wheeling and dealing, and brownnosing are just what the agency needs.

Amos was a full-blown expert on the Arab world, spoke very good Arabic, was always at pains to improve it even more, and seemed familiar with everyone he met here on the streets or in cafés. He was unbureaucratic to the point of sloppiness. Someone ought to remind him what we actually do here, Heller had said once, and Victor could only agree. But so far, this new approach to an old problem didn't seem to bother anyone. Amos had an air of the adventurer about him, and had he not been such an exemplary family man—father of five, soon to be six, churchgoer and basketballer—people would probably have taken him

for an American Lawrence of Arabia. As it was, however, for many he was simply the good American everyone here had been waiting for, a guy the locals hoped understood them. That's all very well, Victor told himself, but are we really here to understand anyone? We pump people for information and buy them, when they're of use to us, and then we write reports on them. He was aware that the main thing bothering him about the new guy's being there was that it questioned his own methods, the approach he'd spent years learning, his whole way of thinking.

For the past six months, Heller had been his only consolation, Heller the failure, constantly overlooked and yet on the ground in the Middle East for longer than Amos had been wearing long pants. Heller saw all sides; he could explain to Victor which possibilities someone like Amos opened up for the agency here in Beirut, simply through his ability to make friends with people who mistrusted every American in town. And Heller saw the danger inherent to this way of doing a dangerous job. "It can go wrong without anyone noticing," he had once said. "In this part of the world, friendships are alliances." Victor had often thought of those words; pronounced like an objective statement, they reverberated as a warning.

Victor stood up and went to the window. As a minor case officer, he could have ignored the big boys' games; he had no influence over them and was glad of it. Word had it Amos's reports took only a brief diversion on the direct route to the State Department. It wasn't presumptuous to believe they were read by Kissinger himself.

Following an old habit, Victor tightened his belt as he stood at the window. When he put on his pants in the morning he always chose the belt's second-last hole, only to establish as the day went on that he was thinner than he thought. And he grinned every time at the tic behind his own behavior.

In any case, his reports didn't end up on the Secretary of State's desk. What he did was basically routine work, albeit in a better location. His best contact this year was Massoud, a policeman, down to earth and with an almost un-Arab directness. The man had been a stroke of luck; he knew everyone there was to know. The most important thing, though: Unlike our new genius's many loose contacts, he was signed up; in other words, he worked for the agency and that meant he could be controlled to an extent not to be underestimated.

That was what Heller was always pointing out: Control, even if it's concealed, means power. And under its aegis, it's even possible to build something like trust. In Heller's eyes, everything else was experiments by college boys with literature majors, adventures of the mind without blood, effort, sweat, and tears—but not without risk. After all, who controlled someone who agreed to collaborate on one day but then changed his opinion the next? The payroll, that is the factual knowledge on both sides of an obligation to the agency, enabled control.

“The information we obtain may well decide over life and death,” Heller had said. “We shouldn't owe it to the quality of the weather or the mood of the man we're talking to. Amos may be a genius, and perhaps his most important contact is as sensational as everyone thinks, but the idealism involved in believing he could make friendship the basis of collaboration is frightening. You know we've got the future big man among the Christians. But does that make Bashir Gemayel our friend?”

Victor returned to his desk and started on his report on his last meeting with Massoud. He had netted a young guy by the name of Ziad, a drifter from the countryside, one of the many young men with nothing to lose. This Ziad was free and would be useful, under good guidance. It was a short report and Victor leaned back, satisfied, until the thought of Amos made him nervous again.

As so often before, in Bar des Fleurs he had thought about what had driven him to work indirectly with the Americans. The most despised foreigners, of all people, were the most sought-after. It was the same all over the region. Ziad raised his tea glass to his lips and nodded at every sip. He knew that didn't exonerate him. In some people's eyes, he remained a traitor.

His eyes drifted across the nightclub's empty tables; the place was robbed of its magic now, in the early evening, like a brightly lit movie theater. The table tops were stained and covered in crumbs, cigarette butts littered the floor, and a broom was leaned against the bar.

Ziad was still wondering at the shabbiness of this establishment, generally considered a meeting place for foreigners, when a shadow behind one of the dark windows drew his attention. As always in such situations, Ziad clenched his muscles, breathed out and dropped

his shoulders. According to his private mythology, that made him blend slightly more into whatever background he was standing or sitting against. Being inconspicuous was important in a city full of conspirators and bomb-planters, especially if you worked for the Americans. Ziad smiled. Working – that sounded much more significant than it was. Emptying dead drops, spying on people, running errands. None of it was exciting, but all of it was dangerous.

The shadow in the window shifted once again. This time, Ziad thought he'd seen jerky movements; he imagined someone was looking for something in his coat pocket. A moment later the shadow was gone, the window empty again as if there'd never been a movement in it. He looked around the room again. He often did that before he made a decision. It forced him to concentrate entirely on the situation, also distracting him, for better or worse, from what lay ahead.

Behind the long black bar counter with the decorated taps and in front of the shimmering wall of mostly French liquor bottles, a young man was mopping the floor. He was so thin that his shirt looked empty. Leaning forward slightly, pitch-black strands of hair fell over his face; he was probably Asian. On the other side, further back in the room, three young men were lounging on upholstered seats. Their niche lay in semi-darkness, a shapely naked woman painted on the wall above them just visible.

Ziad watched the three of them for a few seconds. They were sitting with their backs to him, looking disinterested and occupied only with themselves. He thought they were probably messengers or delivery boys waiting for their next job.

Once again, he went through everything in his mind. The telephone had rung in the early evening, long and piercing, until he'd finally picked up and heard Massoud's familiar voice. He'd sent him to Fleurs to meet someone. He wasn't entirely certain it would work, Massoud said, but it was worth a try. Nebulous jobs like this weren't uncommon, and Ziad got angry every time because they reduced him to the importance of those messenger boys over there, who got treated similarly. Now, though, he didn't let himself curse mentally over people disposing of him and his time as they saw fit. Instead, he recapitulated over the next few seconds what he knew about Massoud. He had no real suspicion, it was more a game of what-if, a brief self-assurance.

He leaned back and stared into the cold light of the neon tubes fixed above the bar. He inspected the large goat-leather lampshades in the middle of the ceiling and thought of the

seductive rosy light they gave off when the space began to fill up with guests at around nine. All that was far away now; neither the shiny metal of the beer taps nor the many layers of bottles, not even the sweetish, sharp smell in the room made a dent in the sober pre-evening mood.

The stage was barely recognizable. The thick carpet covering it was grey and stained. It took Ziad some effort to imagine the dogs' mistress performing her number up there late at night. Half-naked, bathed in red light, she stuck out her breasts and swayed her hips. Above all, though, she pranced around barefoot, and the very way she planted her feet, turned around and, dazzled by the light, looked around with an imperious expression, electrified all the men in the room. That was what Ziad imagined, at least.

For him, she was the idealized European woman, pale and tall, whore and prey one moment, mistress and out-of-reach dream figure in the next, just as she liked. The sight of the now dirty stage disillusioned Ziad. Briefly, he realized how cheap the show was, a few spotlights and loud music—and how effective. In the next instant he saw the dancer before him again, her supple hips, her shapely shoulders and her deep red lipstick.

The thought of her made him flush, and as always at such moments, he despised himself for his youthful horniness, the excessive passion that could get so strong it took his breath away. He thought of the Europeans and Americans, tourists and people he knew from a distance from the agency, those men in jeans and leisure shirts or linen suits. Compared to him, they were rationally thinking adults, they were methodical and reliable, or at least they pretended to be. Everything they did seemed to have been preceded by consideration, and their constant polite distance could easily be misinterpreted here as cold and calculating. Around them, Ziad felt like an animal, unbridled and unpredictable. The thought that these Westerners merely hid their lustfulness better was no consolation; hiding things was their strong point. Something's wrong with us, he thought, we're too hot-blooded. When he thought of the dancer, of her slightly stretched toes when she threw the pointed mules off her feet at the start of her act, his mouth went dry. He wanted to bow down before her and rule over her at the same time, to be below her and above her. The idea of it, though, created a dissonance in his mind that made him wipe his brow with a sigh. Perhaps it's only me there's something wrong with, he thought, and forced himself to concentrate.

He was in danger here too, Ziad knew that, especially here. Even if he didn't seriously suspect Massoud of scheming against him, something could always go wrong. How had he

put it? “Do me a favor, my friend, it’s no big deal. Just stay where you are until he comes. I have a lot of information to evaluate today. You understand, it’s all important, all urgent—you know what the guys up there are like.” It was the usual, first an imposition, then consolation through familiarity.

Ziad looked at his watch. He had been there for half an hour now and no one seemed to have noticed him. The room was open, entered on all sides like a station forecourt, and to Ziad’s surprise no one had come to his table since he sat down.

Behind him, a door creaked, at the spot where a dark corridor led between two larger-than-life porcelain dogs to the restrooms. He leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table. Moments later, a tall man was actually standing next to him. Ziad saw him out of the corner of his eye and didn’t move.

“It rained in the mountains yesterday,” the man said, speaking English.

“On the Black Horn or in the Shouf?” Ziad said quietly.

The man was silent for an uncomfortable length of time, fishing an envelope out of his coat pocket. Eventually, he sat down awkwardly opposite Ziad, laid the flat of his hand on the envelope and pushed it across the table at him.

Ziad smirked.

“I have to ask,” he said, as if talking to himself, “why here of all places?”

“It’s the only place I know in Beirut.” The man looked around allusively. “Sorry,” he added.

He stood up, tugged his coat into place and left. Ziad watched him go, saw him step into the large vestibule and from there into the light of the street. He felt the envelope beneath his hand and wondered whether this man, who looked like he came from the south of the country and might be a Shiite, had actually been waiting for him all along in the restroom. In moments like this, he saw everything he did from the outside. But the game’s ridiculousness didn’t amuse him; it shocked him. Was it different on the agency’s higher floors, was there a level of professionalism that didn’t allow scenes like this one? Who knows, he thought, perhaps that’s an illusion too.

He waited another five minutes, catching a dull, resentful glance from the Asian that expressed nothing but weariness. Then he quickly checked the pile of bank notes in the envelope and got to his feet. Just before the vestibule, he took another look over at the three men and noticed there were four of them. One was sitting so far back in the shadows

that he looked dark blue. Ziad opened the door, stepped outside and took a deep breath. He adjusted the envelope in his pocket, relieved, and turned onto the boulevard.

A few yards on, he stopped. He had resisted the thought, perhaps simply out of lethargy. Now, though, in the fresh dusk wind, the early-evening traffic flowing around him, he saw the dark blue face of the man in the shadow clearly. If it was a coincidence, thought Ziad, then one of those that stop you believing in coincidences. He turned on his heel and returned to Fleurs.

Outside the entrance, he once again admired the showcases, unusual for the region. Where a movie theater would have displayed still photos, there was only a small, weakly lit crimson curtain. It parted at the very bottom, and in the dark slit were a pair of white ladies' shoes, high-heeled, pointed and strappy, as tiny as doll's accessories. Between the shoes, just as small, lay the head of a ragged stuffed dog, cute and threatening at once. That was all; no sign, no lettering, only that arrangement, which for Ziad was exotic and disreputable, the entrance into a cavern of vices.

He grabbed the iron handle and pressed it down. The entrance was still open and unguarded. At the last moment, he thought better of it, closed the door again and turned around. He hurried to the side of the road and waited for a gap in the traffic. Brooding, he looked around and eventually made out a telephone box three blocks along. He crossed the street, walking fast and reaching the telephone before anyone else could occupy it. He exhaled with relief, fingered the coins out of his pocket and called Massoud.

It was a long time before his contact man picked up. Ziad gave another sigh of relief.

"What's up, my friend? Everything go OK?"

"Yes, he gave me something."

"Good, good," said Massoud after a brief pause. "Bring it to me when I say so. What do you want?"

"The black man is here. Do you know anything about it?"

To Ziad's reassurance, there was no pause this time.

"No. Are you sure? Where did you see him?"

"At Fleurs."

"What do you think, brother, what on earth do you think?"

"I don't know what to think. You tell me."

“Don’t think; get out of there. If it really is him, then it’s nothing to do with you. Don’t worry about it.”

“Now you know.”

“Yes. Just get out of there.”

Massoud hung up; Ziad weighed the heavy receiver in his hand for a moment before he put it down. What else did you expect? he asked himself, and he knew his talkativeness on the telephone would get him in trouble again. He had said too much, too many unnecessary words.

Mild salty air blew in from the sea, and through the small grubby panes of the telephone box, the light of the streetlamps and car headlights playing on the pale walls was still a sign of a pleasant early summer evening ahead of the city.

Ziad shook his head to wake himself from his daydreams, turned around and took a step back. Before him stood the man from Fleurs, the one he had just been talking about, only the door of the telephone box between them.