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Abahn

Sabana

David

Translated from the  
French by Kazim Ali

a novel by  
**Marguerite Duras**

 **OPEN LETTER**  
LITERARY TRANSLATIONS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER



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*to Robert Antelme*  
*to Maurice Blanchot*

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Abahn Sabana David

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Abahn  
Sabana  
David

Night comes. And the cold.

They are on the road, white with frost, a woman and a young man. Standing stock still, watching the house.

The house is bare inside and out. The interior still unlit. Beyond the windows a tall man, gray-haired and thin, looks in the direction of the road.

Night deepens. And the cold.

There they are, in front of the house.

They look around. The road is empty, the sky dark against it. They do not seem to be waiting for anything.

The woman heads up to the door of the house first. The young man follows her.

It's she who enters the house first. The young man follows.

She's the one who closes the door behind them.

At the far end of the room: a tall thin man with gray hair watches them enter.

It's the woman who speaks.

"Is this the house of Abahn?"

He doesn't answer.

"Is it?"

She waits. He does not answer.

She is small and slim, wearing a long black dress. Her companion is of medium build, wearing a coat lined with white fur.

"I'm Sabana," she says. "This is David. We're from here, from Staatd."

The man walks slowly toward them. He smiles.

"Take off your coats," he says. "Please sit."

They do not answer. They remain near the door.

They do not look at him.

The man approaches.

"We know each other," he says.

They do not answer, do not move.

The man is close enough now to see them clearly. He notices that they will not meet his eye.

She speaks again. "We're looking for Abahn. This is David. We're from Staatd."

She fixes her large eyes on the man. David's gaze, behind his heavy lids, is inscrutable.

"I am Abahn."

She does not move. She asks:

"The one they call the Jew?"

"Yes."

"The one who came to Staatd six months ago?"

"Yes."

"Alone."

"Yes. You're not mistaken."

She looks around. There are three rooms.

The walls are bare. The house is as bare inside as it is outside. One side abuts the road, white with frost, the other borders the depths of a darkened park.

Her gaze returns to the Jew.

“This is the house of the Jew?”

“Yes.”

In the park, dogs bark and howl.

David turns his head, looks toward the park.

The howling dies down.

It’s quiet again. David turns away from the park, back to the others.

“You were sent by Gringo?”

She answers:

“Yes. He said that he would come later.”

They are silent then, the three of them standing there. The Jew approaches David.

“Do you recognize me?”

David looks down at the floor. She answers:

“He recognizes you.”

“You’re David, the stonemason.”

She replies, “Yes, that’s him.”

“I recognize him,” says the Jew.

David’s eyes are fixed on the floor.

“He’s gone blind,” says the Jew.

They do not answer.

“He’s become deaf.”

They do not answer.

The Jew approaches David.

“What are you afraid of?”

David looks up at the Jew and then back at the floor.

“What are you afraid of, David?” the Jew asks again.

The gentleness of his voice elicits a shudder from behind those heavy-lidded eyes.

She answers:

“Nothing. He’s a member of Gringo’s Party.”

The Jew is silent. She asks:

“Do you know what that means?”

“Not for David,” says the Jew.

For the first time, Sabana looks right at him. He is looking at David.

“But for everyone else, you do?”

“Yes.”

A sudden exhaustion sweeps over the Jew.

“You were waiting for us?”

“Yes.”

He takes a step toward David. David doesn’t flinch. He comes closer. He lifts a hand. Gently touches David’s half-lidded eyes. He says:

“You’ve become blind.”

David jumps back. He cries out:

“Don’t touch me!”

David raises his hands, made swollen and cracked by working with stone, and says:

“Don’t do that again!”

She looks from one to the other without moving. She says nothing.

The Jew backs away. He returns to the chair he was occupying when they first came into the house, the one near the table.

“You’re not scared,” he says, “You have nothing at stake. Take off your coats. Sit. You’re not going anywhere.”

They remain as they are, erect, alert, near the door.

Calmly, she speaks.

“You don’t understand. We’ve come to watch you.”

“Watch me.”

“Don’t try to run away.”

“I won’t.”

“It’s not worth the trouble.”

David is silent. Sabana points out the Jew to David. She repeats what she said to the Jew.

“He knows it’s futile to try.”

“I do know,” says the Jew.

It’s Sabana who takes off her coat first. She puts it down near the door. She helps David with his coat.

Tucked into David’s belt is a gun.

They sit. Sabana pushes an armchair toward David. She sits in another chair.

The Jew is silent.

She sits up straight, looks around. She looks out at the road, the park, the cold. Everything is bathed in the same intense light, inside, outside. Nothing else is lit up. She looks over at the one sitting next to the table.

“We wait for daybreak,” he says.

Sabana’s eyes are blue—dark and blue.

“You’re Sabana.”

“Yes.”

The dogs howl in the dark park.

David listens to the dogs.

The howling dies down.

Silence.

David the mason reclines his head on the back of the chair, his hands draped along the armrests. He looks over at the far end of the room. He speaks.

“There’s someone else in the house.”

“It’s just me,” says the Jew.

“He’s here alone,” she says.

“The Jew,” says David.

“Yes. Don’t be afraid.”

She is still looking around. She is perched on the edge of her seat, still alert. Looking around.

“David has to work tomorrow morning. He has to sleep a little. If you try to run I’ll yell and he’ll wake up.”

“Let him sleep. You keep watch on me. And I’ll stay where I am, over here.”

Slumber settles on David. He looks over at the Jew.

She says:

“He’s falling asleep now.”

The Jew does not answer. Sabana speaks:

“The merchants’ police aren’t out tonight. Gringo made a deal with the merchants. They told him, ‘If you let us sell to the Greeks then we’ll give you Abahn the Jew.’ Gringo agreed. The police sleep tonight. The town is Gringo’s.”

The Jew does not answer, does not move.

“Are you going to try to run away?”

“No.”

The Jew’s exhaustion seems to grow.

“Why not?”

“I have no desire to save myself.”

They sit quietly for a moment. Sabana, alert, turns toward the frost-covered road.

David has closed his eyes.

“Why did you come to Stadt?”

The Jew shrugs his shoulders.

“To kill Gringo?”

“No.”

“Gringo is strong in Stadt. He runs the show with the merchants. He runs the government offices. He has his own police, army, guns. He’s been making the merchants afraid for a long time now. You understand?”

“The merchants of Stadt aren’t afraid of Gringo,” says the Jew.

“Since when?”

“For a long time. The merchants are afraid of the Jews.”

“And who is Gringo afraid of?”

“Gringo is afraid of the Jews.”

“Like the merchants?”

“You know that.”

“Yes,” Sabana looks at him.

“You don’t know what to do with yourself anymore, do you? So you came here?”

“Maybe at first. But then I found Stadt.”

“Like any other place?”

“No.”

They fall silent. David sleeps.

Sabana points at him, says to the Jew, “They all sleep.”

They look at each other. Still silent. She waits. He asks:

“Who are you?”

She hesitates. She looks at David.

“There’s nothing here,” he says. “I am not part of Gringo’s party.”

She is perched on the edge of the chair, waiting. She asks:

“Are you an enemy?”

“Yes.”

“What did you want?”

“I don’t know what I wanted anymore.”

They look at each other in silence for a drawn-out moment.

“Who are you?” he asks again.

He waits. Her eyes narrow, searching. Her face is unreadable. She opens her eyes and says:

“I don’t know.”

The Jew slumps forward over the table. He rests his head in his arms. He stays like that without moving. She asks:

“You didn’t want anything?”

“I didn’t want anything. I wanted everything.”

Silence.

“And tonight?”

“Everything. Nothing.”

“Still?”

“Yes.”

His face can no longer be seen.

“One day you came to David’s workshop. You waited until the workday was finished. It was David who saw you. He asked you, ‘Are you Abahn?’ You said yes. He asked you, ‘What do you want?’ You said ‘I wanted to talk to someone.’ He said, ‘Who?’ You didn’t answer. You just looked at him. He said, ‘Are you looking for David? That’s me.’ You said yes. He asked, ‘Why?’ You said, ‘Because you addressed me.’”

The Jew is silent.

“You remember.”

“Yes.”

“That’s when all this started.”

He doesn’t say a word, doesn’t move.

“I’m telling you, I’m explaining it to you, aren’t you listening?”

He isn’t listening.

Sabana, at full attention, watches him.

•

**The night** deepens. And the cold.

Someone has come in, a tall man, thin, graying at the temples.

Sabana watches him enter. The man smiles at Sabana. She does not smile back. He says:

“I was passing by.”

They look at each other. He looks away, sits down next to David, away from the Jew.

“Close the door. It’s dark, it’s cold out.”

He goes to close the door, comes nearer to her. He gestures toward the frost-covered road beyond the uncurtained windows. Then toward the Jew.

“I was passing by. I saw someone crying. I came.”

The deep blue gaze of Sabana now fixed on the newcomer.

“Who are you?”

“They call me Abahn.”

“His name is also Abahn, but we call him the Jew. Gringo had a meeting this evening. We’re guarding this one until he comes. He said he’ll come at daybreak.”

“Before the light?”

Sabana doesn’t respond immediately. Then:

“Yes.”

Abahn has noticed that David is asleep.

“That’s David,” Sabana says, “the stonemason. I’m Sabana. We’re from the village of Staadt. From Gringo’s party.”

She turns then, gestures toward the Jew, resting his head on the table.

“I don’t think he’s crying.”

Abahn looks at the Jew.

“He is crying.”

She looks then at the one who is crying. Then the one who is speaking.

“He can’t be crying, he wants to live.”

“He’s not crying for himself,” says Abahn. “It’s an empathy for others that forces him to cry. It’s too much for him to bear alone. He has more than enough desire for himself to live, it’s for others that he can’t live.”

She looks at him with interest, his white hands, his smile.

“Who are you to know all this?”

“A Jew.”

She studies his smiling face, his hands, his manner, for a long time.

“You’re not from around here.”

“No.”

She turns away from the night and the cold. “We call him Abahn the Jew, Abahn the Dog.”

“The Jew, also? And the Dog?”

“Yes.”

“And the other Jews here? You call them that, too?”

“Yes.”

“And the dogs?”

“We call them Jews. And where you come from?”

“There as well.”

Her gaze returns to Abahn.

“Are you an enemy?”

“Yes.”

“Of Gringo only?”

“No.”

She does not move at all for a moment, her eyes open, vacant. Then she waves a hand once more at the one who is crying.

“We don’t know anymore whether he is himself. An enemy, too. He’s not from this place after all.

“We don’t know where he comes from.

“He’ll be dead at daybreak.”

Silence. She continues:

“They don’t kill them every single time.”

In the shadows her blue eyes train themselves on Abahn.

“There are no gas chambers here.”

He answers slowly, his gaze frozen.

“There aren’t. There never have been.”

“No.”

“There aren’t any anywhere anymore.”

“No, there aren’t any anymore.”

“Nowhere,” says Abahn.

Sabana’s gaze empties out once more. He says:

“Nowhere.” He looks at her, says again, “Nowhere.”

“No.”

She is quiet again. Then she gestures in the direction of the road, at something no one else can see. Her voice is flat, her stare vacant.

“The ones they leave alive are sent to the salt mines in the North,” she pauses.

“The ones they kill they bury at the edge of the field—” she gestures off. “That way.”

“Under the barbed wire.”

“Yes. No one knows that.”

He does not answer.

“It’s barren, no farming there. The merchants and tradesmen gave it to Gringo after the war for his parties.”

He has not taken his eyes off of her. He asks:

“There aren’t any more parties?”

“The last ones were deserted. It’s been a long time since then.”

“The young people don’t come anymore?”

She doesn’t know, it appears. She is distracted.

“I think so, I don’t really know.”

Her stare is always empty, her voice always flat.

“You could kill them one by one,” she says slowly, “in the Nazi gas chambers.”

“Yes. But not anymore. There aren’t any chambers anymore. Anywhere.”

“No. No, here you get the labor camp or a quick death.”

“Yes.”

Her blue eyes slash always in the direction of the road. She says:

“It wasn’t these Jews here in those gas chambers.”

“No, it was others.”

“Others,” she pauses, “but the same name: Jews.”

“Yes. We wanted that.”

She asks nothing more.

He looks at the bare walls, the white road white with frost, the darkened park beyond.

“It was his house,” he says.

“Yes. And there’s a park. There. And in the park there are dogs.”

Her gaze comes back to the space in front of them.

She gestures toward the back of the house that opens onto the park. “There’s this room that looks out on the park, the other you came from. If you try to run away, I’ll call out to David. David will wake up and he’ll kill you.”

He smiles. She says:

“That’s the way, here in Gringo’s houses in Staadt. They shoot, they kill. Unless we tell them that they don’t have the right, then they don’t have the right. Before it would take a little longer.”

“And whose territory are we in now?”

“The one who is the strongest. During the night that would be Gringo.”

“And in the day it’s the merchants.”

“Yes,” she says. “Before, a long time before Gringo.”

Abahn gets up, he walks back and forth across the room, going and coming, and then he sits near the Jew, on the opposite side of the table from him. She joins them. She sits with them. They look at the Jew. She talks, is quiet some more, talks again.

“He didn’t know where to go when he came here. He came here because he didn’t have anywhere else to go. He’s been here for a few days already, waiting for us. The merchants were also looking to get rid of him, as you see.”

“Yes.”

She looks at Abahn for a long time.

“And you?”

“I came to Staadt now, tonight.”

“By chance?”

“No.”

Silence. She is still focused on him.

“You’re alone as well?”

“Yes. With the Jews.”

He smiles. She does not return his smile. It is almost as if she doesn’t see it. She says:

“This house is being confiscated by the merchants, the park, too. Not because of the dogs; we don’t know what will happen to them. They find it hard to adjust to a new master. We don’t know what to do with them.”

“Maybe. Did the Jew have anything to say about it?”

“Not yet.”

He looks at her more intensely.

“Did you ask him that question?”

“Which one?”

“About what is going to happen to the dogs?”

She turns toward the dark park.

“Maybe later,” she says, “later in the night.”

David shifts in his chair. He opens his eyes.

Then falls asleep again. Abahn says:

“David wakes up when we talk about the dogs?”

“Yes. You guessed it.”

The same slowness creeps into their voices. He asks:

“Why did you let me in? For what?”

She says quickly:

“You came in.”

“Why did you speak to me?”

“You spoke to me.”

Abruptly his glare flares, then subsides.

“You’re not afraid of anything,” he says. “Nothing.”

Silence. He regards her slim form, erect, alert. Her half-lidded stare. She listens out the window: the dogs are barking.

Far, in the direction she listens, that of the setting sun, the dogs are barking. Muted but numerous.

The barking ceases. He asks:

“Are you afraid now?”

“Not as much.”

“You’re not afraid for yourself?”

“No.” She pauses, considers. “Not fear.”

He waits. She is thinking. She finds what she wants to say:

“It’s to be suffered.”

“Badly?”

She considers again:

“No. In full.”

They fall silent.

•

**She gets** up. She walks toward David. She gestures toward Abahn. She speaks in a low tone. “They know each other a little, David and the Jew.”

She is listening to the sounds of Staadt outside.

“I think they are still coming.”

She turns in the direction of the frost-covered road, pauses.

“You said they knew David a little?”

“Yes. Some people knew him. David may have forgotten, but they knew him.” She pauses again. He says nothing. She turns to him.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing.”

They look at one another.

He asks:

“Who are you?”

She focuses on him, his intense gaze, interrogating.

“I don’t know,” she says.

His stare bores into her.

“I mean to him—who are you to him?”

She shrugs. She does not know anymore.

“Are you his wife?”

“Yes.”

“Are you his mother?”

She does not answer. She is thinking.

“You’re not his mother?”

“He wishes I were his mother.”

“You don’t want that?”

“No.”

The Jew raises his head. She sees him. For a long while she looks at him. Then she goes to sit down next to him again. She is quiet the whole time. Then she speaks to him in even tones:

“You wrote. You talked with people. You didn’t work.”

She is talking to Abahn.

“He walked in the streets, the avenues, night and day. He went to see the shipyards. From time to time he went to the cafes to talk with people.”

“He spoke to them?”

“Yes, he asked them many questions.”

“And David too?”

“Yes, David too. From time to time you would tell them some things difficult to follow, as if they could understand. And then it was explained to us what you were saying.”

“Gringo?” asked Abahn.

“Yes.”

She is trying to remember.

“He said, ‘Liberty.’”

“And how did Gringo explain it?”

“Money.”

“He said, ‘Underneath the truth.’”

“And how did Gringo explain that?”

“Crime.”

“He said, ‘Live into the future.’”

“And how did Gringo explain that?”

“Proof.”

She thinks. She asks the Jew:

“What did you say?”

“Don’t believe anything anymore,” says the Jew.

“Nothing. No one,” says Abahn.

“Not even you?” asks Sabana.

“Not me, not him, no one.”

“Not him?”

“Not him. How would Gringo put it?”

“Don’t listen to Gringo anymore.”

They fall silent. Sabana considers what the Jew said.

“He said, ‘You should be happy no matter what.’”

“How would Gringo put it?”

“He didn’t explain.”

Sabana, her eyes on the ground, in a dream, for a long moment. Then she speaks without shifting her gaze.

“Where would he go if they let him go?”

No one answers her.

“And if someone grabbed David’s gun?” she says. “I’ve never left Staadt. I don’t know anything about what’s beyond.”

“Are you thinking about the Jew?” asks Abahn.

"I'm thinking. Where would he go?"

"Beyond here," says Abahn, "more Staadt, other Jews. And beyond that more, an unending chain all the way to the border."

"Until when?"

"The sea. And then along the bottom of the sea."

She is dreaming.

"It's fully occupied?"

"Fully."

Silence.

She looks away at the invisible distant border. The Jew, unmoving, watches.

"Other Jews," she says.

"Yes, and other Gringos," says the Jew.

"Merchants or no," says Abahn, "other Jews, other Gringos, all the same."

She is still looking off into the distance.

"It wouldn't do any good to run away then," she says.

"No," says the Jew.

Again sounds the muted barking of the dogs, their growls rising, in the direction Sabana looks.

She says:

"Those are the dogs of the killing fields."

Silence.

Abahn asks:

"Are there many dead?"

Sabana seems uncertain.

"They say twenty million in all. I don't know about the dead."

Sabana's gaze returns to them. The Jew still watches.

•

The cold deepens still. And the night. The sky is nearly gone. The park completely in shadow.

"It's the ice," says Sabana. "Outside you walk on the road—you slip, it'll kill you."

"We are locked in then," says Abahn.

"Together," says the Jew.

Silence.

The dogs howl, those belonging to the Jew, close by, in the park.

Like every other time, David briefly rouses.

Abahn stands, slowly turns around the room, then walks toward David, stops in front of him. Sabana watches him.

"How old is he?" asks Abahn.

"Twenty-five," says Sabana. "Married to Jeanne."

"Neither Jew nor dog, ever?"

"No."

He gestures at David's calloused hands. "A laborer?"

"He's not qualified for it, he works on the Portuguese crew."

He comes closer to David. Sabana does not move.  
“And whose gun is it?”  
“It’s Gringo’s.”  
“Taken just for tonight?”  
“Yes.”  
“To execute the Jew?”  
Sabana turns toward the Jew. He does not look like he is listening.  
“No. Just to keep him here.”  
“So it’s Gringo who’s in charge of the Jew’s execution?”  
“Yes. Gringo.”  
“You’re sure? Gringo?”  
Her eyes widen suddenly with fear. She gestures toward David.  
“Look, do you think he’s too young?”  
“No. He’s already got a gun on him, hasn’t he?” says Abahn.  
She turns back to the Jew. Eyes still wide.  
“You said something?”  
“No.”  
Silence.  
“Who will kill you?”  
The Jew doesn’t answer.  
“David?” asks Abahn.  
She doesn’t think, just answers:  
“Why would David kill the Jew?”  
The Jew’s voice comes so softly, one could hardly understand what he said.  
She is not looking at him anymore. She repeats:  
“Why?”  
They do not answer her. She answers herself.  
“So that Gringo won’t?”  
They still do not answer. She says:  
“If it was David who killed the Jew, then who would you say killed the Jew?”  
“David,” says the Jew.  
She looks at Abahn.  
“You heard what he said?”  
“Yes.”  
“Well, answer him.”  
“I say if Gringo kills the Jew, only then would it be Gringo who would have killed the Jew.”  
“I say no. I say if it’s David who pulls the trigger, it’s still Gringo who has killed him.”  
“No,” says the Jew.  
She stands and up and stares them down. Her glare is cutting. She addresses the Jew. “Explain.”  
“We can talk about what Gringo said later,” says the Jew in a low voice.  
“Later after what?”  
“After David has shot the Jew.”  
She is silent.