REVIEW

Septentrionale, by Karim Kattan

by Nicolas Becard

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One night, one road, a star for a compass: in this breakneck road trip that gradually slides into a fairy tale, Karim Kattan reminds us that hope will always reside in words.



One night, one road, a star for a compass. ✨

Dusk. Maryam, at the wheel, speeds north, fast, as fast as she can. When the silhouette of a young hitchhiker looms up in her headlights, she cannot bring herself to leave him there: never mind the possible danger, a far greater danger rumbles behind them.

Time is running out. Sheltered inside the car, they plunge into the darkness. Everything trembles, the night turns scarlet, it burns, you see nothing, you feel everything.

🚗 Through short chapters, between memories and suffocating countdowns, the characters take shape as the miles go by. Memories flood back: the violence of their childhoods, but also the love and desire that led them to this night, a crossroads, with one shared goal: to survive.

In this breakneck road trip, a one-night huis clos, every certainty collapses except one: what was will be no more by morning. When everything wavers, when time warps, when a young man met along the way turns into a dolphin, what is left to them? Clinging to the tangible, to the immutable, to what came before them and will outlive them, the only light in the chaos of their fates: the Septentrionale, the North Star.

✨ Karim Kattan's new novel plays with form and conventions. Never truly located anywhere, it is far more about trajectory than territory. In this race for life, this forced exile, the night becomes a pretext for a shift in genre: little by little, the text takes on the contours of a fairy tale, the best form when reality becomes unspeakable.

The universality of the text, the hope embodied in two bodies in motion, stirred in me fond memories of another tale. Without quite knowing why, images of Bastian and Atreyu riding Falkor in *The NeverEnding Story* accompanied my reading. All three pursued by the Nothing and the oblivion devouring their world, they fly with Fantasia in their sights, to speak a new name that will save the Empress, just as Maryam and Joseph race on so that their country, through them, will not die.

Naming in order to save, language as a lifebuoy: hope will always reside in words. 🌙

— Nicolas Becard

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