

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document:

**WAKING UP IN BEIRUT**

Zein El-Amine, MFA, 2010

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The poems in *Waking Up in Beirut* are mainly obsessed with an exile's search for home. The first section is a sequence of poems that starts as an elegy for a friend and expands into an elegy for Washington DC. The second section charts a return to the poet's geographical home, and deals more directly with the poet's ethnic identity.

This section delivers more elegies in the form of narrative, mostly dealing with three women who were central to the poet's life. In the third section the poet attempts to break out of the narrative into the lyrical. This last section defines the poet's evolution through his apprenticeship and represents an embarkation point for future works.

WAKING UP IN BEIRUT

By

Zein El-Amine

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Dedication

To Zaloom

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**I**  
**Swamp City**

## Henry

The night we sent Henry off  
felt like a cocktail party at first, and I wished  
for a tear-your-hair kind of funeral,  
like we do back home. His sister finally  
set it off, when she viewed the body:  
“My brother looks goood.” And louder,  
in case anyone missed it:  
“My brother looks daaamn goood!”  
Tipped the whole thing over;  
we cried and wailed, and the Rhythm  
Workers’ Union drummed until the church  
rafters shook.



## **Herring Highway**

My daily run starts along Irving,  
skirts the zoo, descends  
by Rock Creek, bends with it  
until it brings me up by Marilyn Monroe's  
mural and then over the Duke Ellington  
Bridge, past the over-thrust fault line  
that follows the creek's path and then down  
again to where the water slows  
at the bend of Herring Highway.  
I rest on a stone in the path of the moving  
waters and, as my mind settles, I move  
through the water.

## The Ellington

I walk with Henry, west on U Street.  
He points out the corner at 14th,  
where the People's Drug once stood,  
tells me how in '68  
Stokely walked in there, told the manager  
to close up shop, walked all the way down  
the 14th street corridor and repeated  
his warning to every store  
before the whole thing was set on fire.  
Henry is talking about how this city was the city of the Duke,  
of Louis, of Ella, of Langston before it was of the developers':  
the Hoffmans, the Clarks Miller and Longs;  
when suddenly he stops mid-sentence  
before a tanning salon on the ground floor of a new condo  
bearing the name "The Ellington."  
He yells out for the entire street to hear:  
*There is a fucking tanning salon in the Ellington!*  
The blond-haired, paint-by-number  
owner, that we mistook for a mannequin for a moment,  
mistakes Henry's indignation for endorsement  
and yells back:  
*Yes! And today we have a half-off special!*

## **We, the Noisy**

Yet again he gets confused at the corner,  
misses where he is supposed to turn,  
walks back up and turns on Euclid. It's this  
"Villagio" building that throws him off.  
He walks holding hands with his grandson,  
joining all the folks returning from church.

The only white man on Euclid is on  
an Open House sign, and the man  
is everywhere, fingers in his ears,  
a grimace on his face and a caption  
above his picture:  
"Tired of Noisy Neighbors?"  
and below it:  
"New Condos Featuring Sound Isolation System!"

The boy looks at the new building  
on his block. He has never seen anyone  
sit on the stoops like people do,  
or shout out to each other from the windows.  
He has seen lights at night that spilled out  
on all these empty balconies. So there must  
be someone there.

He asks his grandfather about  
the new invisible neighbors.  
The grandfather tells him that  
they're there all right and shows  
him where they enter and where  
they leave. He explains: *If you wait  
long enough they'll come out to walk  
their dogs. That's the only time you  
will see them.* Then, more to himself  
than the kid, *from the end of a muzzle.*

## Café Riche

When you walked in,  
it was like walking into a hangout  
for the red aristocracy of the old Soviet Union.  
The dim light did not seem deliberate,  
the maroon curtains were too long for the windows,  
spilling in dusty luxury over the floor.  
On one wall old books were stacked at all angles,  
from floor to ceiling – in French, English,  
German, Spanish and Arabic – all languages  
Benny, the proprietor, spoke.  
The only bare wall was exposed brick  
with a “Fuck You” spray painted  
diagonally near the ceiling.

The handwritten menu and prices changed  
according to Benny’s mood.  
If you caught him on a good day  
you would get quite a bargain:  
he would suggest something good,  
bring you a cigarette on a plate,  
get you a free glass wine and let you read  
in peace. On a bad day, you’d be lucky if he noticed you,  
or even luckier if he didn’t: he would greet you  
with *What do you want my friend ?* Shoo you away  
at the end of the meal with *We are going to be busy today  
and I have people to seat.* On a bad day  
that “Fuck You” made sense.

Once there was a couple who came on a bad day.  
They were new to the city.  
The man, in his polo shirt. The woman, with a frilly collar.  
The restaurant was completely empty  
and Benny was completely out of patience.  
The woman asked, *Is the lamb fresh?*  
And Benny answered, *Very.*  
The man asked, *How fresh?*  
And Benny answered *I will show you.*  
Into the kitchen he disappeared,  
and returned dragging a slaughtered lamb  
behind him.

When the Latinos of Mt. Pleasant had enough  
of police brutality, they rioted in their neighborhood,  
and then headed for Adams Morgan.

All the merchants boarded up their stores  
except Benny. He put on his most colorful turban  
and his best Spanish and sat outside the restaurant  
with a boom box, blaring salsa, and a pile of books.

When the last shard of glass fell  
on the sidewalks of 18<sup>th</sup> street,  
Benny's storefront was the only one intact.  
But cocaine and taxes finally did Benny in,  
and where Café Riche once stood, there stands now  
a Cluck - U Chicken.

## **Waking Up in Beirut**

The Section 8 housing complex forms a U facing my bedroom.  
At night it turns into an amphitheater of desperation –  
a bullhorn blaring every domestic fight and lover's quarrel.  
All the anger amplified against the bedroom bay windows  
with perfect acoustics, I hear every curse's last  
syllable, every drunk's half-articulated threat.  
The early morning hours bring a chorus  
of the manic mantras of ones on something  
and the frightful mumblings of ones coming down.

On summer nights, when tenants pop out of their cramped apartments,  
I can feel the air push against the windows,  
shift with every shove, every passing hour, every threat.  
I wait for the slap, the punch, the stray bullet to enter my home.  
On some far corner I hear gunfire in its familiar understated way  
and like the boys on my corner I can guess its caliber  
and tell you if it is coming or going.

On some nights I wake up in my home, thinking  
I am back in Beirut, windows ablaze with light.  
The cops are shining floodlights on my corner to fight crime again.  
Apparently, my neighbor mutters, intense light and heat kill poverty.  
I stumble to the window to watch as residents walk about  
jaded to the scrutiny of the cops' floodlights,  
like our Palestinian neighbors used to do in Tyre  
during the flood of nightly flares that lit up Rashideye Refugee Camp.

## May God Preserve You

Kareem shows up at the Fairview public housing complex every Sunday morning at 8:30 a.m. to pick up his two kids and he returns at 4:30 p.m. to drop them off. By the way the mothers look at him, you know he is admired. By the way their partners ignore him, you know he is envied. One afternoon, he drops the kids off and crosses the complex's playground to walk down Clifton, to the metro, as he usually does. But instead, he turns around and walks up to University Place where he sees Sergeant Gonzalez yelling at two of Fairview's kids. He knows the kids, and he knows Gonzalez, so he feels that, in the best of traditions, he should stand witness. He takes out a notebook and starts taking down the scene. Gonzalez is pacing back and forth, hovering above the kids who have been forced to sit on the sidewalk. He spots Kareem taking notes and yells to his partner, *Get him up on the curb!* Kareem doesn't wait for the partner to give the order and steps back onto the sidewalk without missing a letter.

Above them, on the top floor of a townhouse, a man hears the ruckus and looks down at the scene. He senses that tempers are teetering and that something is about to go down, as things inevitably do around this neighborhood. He disappears and returns with a camera. By this time, Gonzalez is pacing back and forth like a hyena; he snaps at the kids then at Kareem who had, absentmindedly, stepped down from the curb again. The cameraman knows from experience that this is a preface to something unpredictable. So he steps up on the bay window sill and starts filming. He makes himself as visible to the street as possible, locates Kareem and the cop behind him in the viewfinder. A woman walks into the frame and starts arguing with the cop loudly but does not get a response. She walks in closer behind the cop and taps him on the shoulder. The video camera battery light starts blinking. The cameraman steps down in a panic, slides out the battery and slips in a new one. As he fiddles with the battery, he hears Gonzalez shout again, *I told you to step back!* He moves the camera up again and the scene streaks in the viewfinder before he locates Kareem on the ground with Gonzalez on top of him with his knee to Kareem's back. He scans up to find the other cop holding the woman by the shoulders, and the woman holding her torn earlobe. Residents start to pour out of Fairview. Gonzalez gets in his car and calls in back up. Minutes later the patrol cars begin to pull up, one by one, until Clifton is flooded with a shifting river of red and blue lights. The camera takes it in. Gonzalez rushes the detained kids to the back seat of his car. As his partner leads a handcuffed Kareem away, they both look up to spot the cameraman for the first time.

On a cold Christmas Saturday morning, Kareem waits under the canopy of one of the Fairview building entrances. He puffs into his fists, stomps his feet, and rehearses a phrase in Arabic, repeats it like a prayer. He had learned the identity of the witness from his lawyer, and a line in the cameraman's language, practiced with the appropriate dialect. He stands in the doorway for hours before he spots the man leaving the neighboring townhouse. He runs up to him, calling to him by his full name, with perfect pronunciation, and introduces himself to the startled and half-awake stranger. Kareem stands, panting before him, respectfully holds his hand to his chest, and thanks him for saving him from the trumped-up charges; then, he utters the practiced expression flawlessly: *Alla Yihfazzak*, may God preserve you.

## Surveillance

*You-with-the-striped-shirt* sits  
with *You-with-the-dreads* and *You-*  
*with-the-cap*. Nya runs out of the building,  
passes them as she chases the ice cream truck.  
She thinks it's leaving but it's just arriving.  
She buys the ice cream and taunts  
*With-the-dreads* with it. He fakes  
a swipe at the cone and smiles.

She settles on the stoop facing the boys.  
They look at her in a strange way – waiting  
for something to happen that they know  
is going to happen but are surprised  
that she doesn't know. She thinks it's all about  
the ice cream and shouts "you can look all you want,  
but you ain't gettin' any." *You-with-the-dreads* shouts  
back "you are about to get some though!"

Just when the boys give up staring, a voice rises  
above her: "You with the red shirt!" She looks  
around, thinking it's the boys messing with her.  
"Yes, you with the red shirt, get off the stoop,  
no loitering allowed!" Nya is confused,  
she stands up and sees the new intercom - the source  
of the voice, and bulbous eye - the camera.  
Then another order: "Move your fat ass!"

*You-with-the-red-shirt* runs back into the building,  
loses the ice cream, yells a name  
all the way up the stairs. Surveillance sits  
far away from Fairview Apartments,  
in Rockville somewhere, watches her  
and turns a knob that pumps music  
into all the entranceways of the DC complex.  
*You-with-the-striped shirt* picks up a brick  
and is restrained by a laughing *Dreads*.



## **Maria of Malcolm X Park**

Her living room is decorated  
with found objects from the street  
or the dumpster dives.

In the corner, a chipped white piano  
piled with metal weavings and vases - all dented,  
scraped, and pounded oblique. All like notes rising  
out of it.

I imagine her playing the piano  
after the morning John and before the lunchtime one.  
Or maybe after the lunchtime John and before the after-  
work one.

I wonder if there are such times,  
and if there are such clients.

I wonder if there is a shedding that has  
to happen between the hotel rooms and the home,  
or if that is what the music is for?

I wonder if sometimes, some things are lost  
along the way. I wonder if they are retrievable.

I have seen her on one of those  
August days, when we are all in the headlock  
of the city's humidity, carry water  
to the parched men in Malcolm X Park.

Her long black hair  
pinned up with chopsticks, her slender arms  
tendon-rippled with the weight of the water jugs.  
Her face hidden behind oversized sunglasses.

She usually waters her garden and reads  
into the evening. Retreats back upstairs, to her bedroom  
with the metal flowers and the watchful statuette of Isis,  
to her many projects.

She shows one to me one day,  
reluctantly, a book about the ex-prisoners  
of the Lorton Penitentiary.

A graphic novel where she often sets  
her listening silhouette against the wrinkled black faces,  
or the dark recollections, of her interviewees.

She calls me one night  
close to midnight, says she is jogging  
through Rock Creek Park. Tells me to look  
at the moon when I get a chance.

Walking home, I see it just as she  
must have seen it, through the trees,  
its light filtered a gorgeous orange  
by the impure air.

## Chinatown

Underdressed for a freezing  
Christmas day, plugged into my music,  
and plugged out of a new foreign  
crowd, I went looking for Chinatown  
among the Chinese franchise signs.

*Fairuz* pops up on my Ipod,  
singing “Zorouni.” Surprises me  
after a *Modest Mouse* song, takes me  
from under the mammoth squat  
of the Convention Center to the huddle  
of the buildings of Hamad Street.

Balconies brim with the scent of sauté  
of pine nuts in butter, the domestic rants  
of Abu Adnan, and the sad discord  
of Egyptian songs that spill out  
of the windows to meet the vendor calls  
floating up into them; while Hajji’s  
ablutions mark our hours.

Frustrated Romeos pace the balconies  
and pretend to study for their national exams  
while they study the coy girls across the alley,  
pretend to clean their pristine porches.

Nido powder milk cans  
dangle from different floors,  
some on the way down  
to Abu Musa’s corner shop  
and some on their way up  
with the missed tomato,  
bunch of parsley,  
or the bit of cumin.

Fairuz gives way  
to the *Flaming Lips*  
and the complaint of DC’s sirens.  
The alleyway vendor calls,  
*Al Sickeen Ya Bateekh*,  
knife-cut-watermelon,  
and the *Asabee El Bubu Ya Khyar*,

baby-finger-tender-cucumber,  
are left stranded in the icy air  
above 9th street, locked out  
of earshot by the sealed glass  
of soundproof condos.

## Freedom Plaza

From the minute we step out of the metro station  
we get a sense of what the day will bring. Riot-gearred  
cops greet us with a familiar smirking silence,  
and follow us to our start at DuPont Circle.  
From there, and all the way to Freedom Plaza,  
they cut us off at every intersection, and at every intersection  
we brace for a clampdown. On bicycles they swerve  
into the marchers, buzzing behind and in front of us.  
At L Street someone breaks a Citibank window, and a hive  
of armed men, from the many, color-coded, DC security forces,  
is released from the Starbucks across the street. The media  
jumps all over it: evidence that we are violent. So we spend  
the day un-spinning the story; we ask if this is about taxation  
without representation or about the damage to the tea.  
At K Street, the suits jeer at us from the office balconies.  
*Get a job* they say. *Get a soul* we answer. Then at 14th and G,  
the cops drop their gauntlet. A line of meat-stuffed  
vests bump against us until they are close enough  
for our patchouli to mingle with their after-shave. Nose to nose,  
they sneer at us, whisper coffee-perfumed provocations, *try me*  
*motherfucker, try me*. Then, suddenly, they let us go because,  
in their cat game, they want us to think that we are free.

## **At the Blue Plains Sewage Plant**

Henry waits in Pershing Park  
with the Rhythm Workers' Union  
as he promised, and the organizers  
promised a peaceful legal space to drum.  
But the cops move in on everyone:  
the drummers, the cyclists, the nurses  
that were lunching, and even a retired military man  
watching the lively spectacle. They handcuff them,  
load them up on school buses, and send them  
to the Blue Plains Sewage Plant where they hog-tie  
them and lay them out on a gymnasium floor,  
hands pulled to feet, and backs  
arched into 600 question marks.

## Herring Highway

“In the swamp in secluded recesses,  
A shy and hidden bird is warbling a song.”  
-Walt Whitman

Henry, there is a spot in Rock Creek Park,  
called Herring Highway, where you can't see  
the city and the city can't see you, where the herring  
come up once a year, swimming upstream,  
and every year the Bucket Brigade waits for them  
to scoop them by the hundreds and carry them  
over the fords upriver. Every time that I pass this spot  
I think of where you left off and where we keep returning,  
where you stopped and where we are still compelled  
to go and I wonder: were we the benevolent Brigade  
or the hard-headed herring?

In this city, ever more stagnant, we felt like we were  
the only thing moving. And as everything we know disappeared  
we kept trying to retrieve it. We are now strangers here Henry,  
in this city of empty balconies and soulless lights. If you could  
only see what has become of your city, the nothingness  
spreading through it. The nothingness that straightens out all the curves,  
rusts all that is rustic, dulls all texture, sanitizes all that is pungent.  
We see it everywhere, as we expected it everywhere,  
in the streets of my birth, in the streets of your birth,  
in our exile, and in the exile from our exile. Every morning  
I look out of my window to these last strongholds of desperation,  
these amphitheatres of pain, and wait for someone to remember  
that this swamp moved once, before it became still again,  
to recognize what has died and declare it to the street, to set things  
off, as Stokely did in '68, as the Latinos in '92,  
as your sister did when she viewed your body.

**II**



## National Airport

We walk out of that plane,  
at National Airport  
and the heat and humidity  
that we thought we have left behind  
make us doubt that we had ever left.

Now I find myself at the National,  
sitting in my work truck,  
on that same tarmac.  
The wind dances  
with the immigrant dust,  
and the foreign sun interrogates me.  
I turn on the radio, and Fairuz's voice pours  
out like a chilled breeze  
into the stagnant heat.  
Makes me wonder  
how I got to this clearing  
and forget what country this is.

I turn up the AC,  
dust swirls,  
and gathers  
into Fairuz herself.

She says to me:

*How many times do I have to brush the hair  
off your brow habeebi?  
How many times do I have to smooth your eyebrows?  
And why are you sitting in all of this dirt like this?*

I ask:

What's that voice you're speaking with?  
And she answers:  
*Really now!  
It's your mother,  
your country wailing,  
and returns to dust.*

I wake up in a bed.  
At home,  
or a hotel room?  
I am not sure.  
Snow is falling.  
I walk to the balcony.  
Snow begins to swirl,  
becomes a scarf,  
a light blue dress,  
which blooms

with floral patterns  
that I recognize.

Hands extend  
through sleeves – hands  
that had checked my temperature. Hands  
that had made me lebne sandwiches,  
bathed me, scrubbed me (a little too hard).

The teapot in the kitchen  
whistles. Snow swirls,  
gathers,  
until it is aunt Sharife.

She lands running. Runs  
past me

to the kitchen: *Tokburni!*  
*Come in from the cold*  
*so that I can bring you your tea.*  
*I don't know why you come to this country*  
*that's all ice*  
*or hellfire. Anyway*  
*you do what you want to do. Why*  
*should it concern me,*  
*since my end is always near?*  
*Why are you looking so thin?*  
*Don't tell me that your wife doesn't cook for you.*  
*I told you to marry one of your own.*  
*Here,*  
*Hayate,*  
*go to sleep –*  
*lie down so that I can cover you,*  
*lie down so that I can tuck you in tightly,*  
*as I always do.*

I get up ...  
but I don't wake up.  
I am back in Las Vegas,  
where we were "naturalized,"  
with its searchlights,  
and its lost people.

I see an old man sitting on the sidewalk,  
sitting at the bottom of all the light.  
His mind so busy with remembering  
it turns all the roulette wheels in town.

He turns up a dusty face:  
*What's that language you're thinking in?*  
*It sounds so familiar.*  
I say, *Arabic.*

*Can you say something in Arabic?*

So I sing:  
*Kanu Zaman ou kan,*  
*fi dekanu bill hai.*  
*Wabnayat wa subyan*  
*byilaabu ala ilmai.*

He holds his head  
in his hands, tanned  
like mine:  
*It's been a long time,*  
*It's like music, isn't it?*

I say:  
You look familiar.  
Do I know you?

He stands up to meet my eyes,  
the Caesar's Palace fountain bursting  
behind him,  
and says:  
*Don't you know?*  
And so I ask him:  
What am I supposed to know?  
And that is when he says:  
*nothing at all.*

## **A Flyover Deir Keifa**

The siesta breeze  
paces up and down the staircase,  
from balcony to courtyard,  
courtyard to balcony.

It enters our room,  
washes over our faces,  
hops from brother to brother,  
cousin to cousin,  
points out all the open windows,  
teases us with all the birds  
mocking from the trees.

It crawls over aunt Walade  
who lies sprawled across her futon,  
after we had walked on her back,  
half-covered in a quilt,  
happy-face down,  
as we had left her.

It kneels before Sittu's bed,  
watches her direct the vines,  
keep the bees honed to their hive,  
and ward off the snakes from our land.

It rises up to aunt Sharife's high bed  
where she drowns in her Valium sleep  
and her restless dreams  
of all the chores  
she should be doing.

It pours out of the back door  
to be tossed about with the afternoon chicken chatter  
and rises with the sorrowful braying  
of Abu Ali's donkey.

But it disperses before Deir Keifa's clouds,  
dug in the open pastures  
of Deir Keifa's defenseless sky,  
shivering in their southward watch  
to the roar of approaching phantoms.

## Tokburni

### I

On a Brooklyn rooftop someone  
talks about the storm. We see the last  
of Hugo move in. From a truncated  
Manhattan skyline, two beams shoot  
up into the September Saturday night.  
Someone asks me what I am working on.  
I am confused by the question.  
I am distracted by the weather.  
I ask if we shouldn't be making our way  
back home.

### II

Monday night, on a DC rooftop,  
a pockmarked Ramadan moon sinks  
west instead of its expected arc eastward and upward.  
I remember: you are gone.  
Now, and from here, a draped landscape  
sprinkled with stone houses  
all Chagall-askew;  
donkeys and chickens set up on hilly  
pedestals. Nothing of daily life is concealed. Spirits  
ancient and new: Phoenician, Roman, Greek  
and Arab, move between our low-crouching weather  
and arid land

### III

Your garden fills with meters of fertile soil,  
a place where monks kept their cows for decades .  
The same soil you used to fill your Nido Milk cans  
and plop your found strange seeds. They burst into things  
of beauty that scared us with their ferocity, flowers within  
flowers that opened and closed with no allegiance to light.  
In that courtyard seat you would sit knitting  
with these botanical creatures perched upon your shoulders,  
sharp colors framing your olive joy.  
You looked up when we approached and then came the  
anticipated *tokburni* – a word we spoke everyday but could not weigh  
until the Sunday when a nephew and a nephew, a nephew and a nephew,  
carried you for a change, cocooned in the white linen.

## Shooting Sharife

Rayan keeps clicking away at her,  
always missing her by a moment.  
Catches her heel in a flip flop,  
as she ducks into the kitchen  
to grab a chair. A half-blurred  
face as she turns from him to me.

She whirls her words around  
as she dusts, wipes and curses  
flies. Sits for a second but  
bolts before he snaps –captures  
a close up of a her waist – a cotton  
dress bunched up with a rubber band –  
a makeshift belt that she moves up  
as she shrinks with age.

The cigarettes uninterrupted –  
she has been smoking them for seven  
decades, unfiltered for the first three, but  
never a cough. The “Grapes of Wrath” didn’t get her  
even though she refused to vacate  
the village. The Red Cross found her  
intact after a hit sprayed her walls with shrapnel.

The Summer Rain also missed her –  
she woke up with her curtains on fire, grains  
of glass speckling her bed sheet, walked  
out to find the neighbors’ water tank  
smoldering in her courtyard and proceeded  
to clean up the mess.

Rayan finally nails it: every wrinkle focused,  
mouth still for the moment, face framed  
in tattered muslin, left finger fixed on chin,  
the right hand already conjuring a ghost.

## Sittu

Through half dreams I remember you,  
through half closed eyes,  
by the kerosene light,  
veiled by your scarf of smoke,  
comforted by your familiar scent  
of rain-filled fields  
of damp grain cellars.

Or in the hush of dawn,  
awakened to your mournful murmurs,  
and the rustle of the cotton-quiet folding  
and unfolding of your body in worship.

How you wore time  
like scars from a brutal rite of passage,  
lips ripened to the verge of utterance,  
ready with a proverb for every deed.

Your clarity of sight,  
your winnowing wisdom,  
that sifts through morality  
the way you sift through the crushed wheat  
and the lentils,  
under your lemon tree.

## Cluster

*“What we did was insane and monstrous.”*

-Head of IDF rocket unit, July 2006

On his last evening  
Abu Ali walked home  
between the rows of pine  
that line his driveway,  
settled in the shelter  
of his grape arbor, rolled  
a cigarette, was served tea  
by his wife,  
who was preparing  
for the expected arrival  
of unexpected guests.  
He spotted a cluster  
above his head  
and tugged at it.  
The stem snapped,  
the concealed cylinder slipped,  
its yellow ribbon followed,  
fluttered down,  
like a ticker tape.  
A dull pop was heard.  
A flash lit up the arbor –  
Abu Ali’s last dispatch  
to Marjiyoon’s children:  
there is danger above  
the ground too.

All throughout that month,  
that followed the Summer Rain,  
he had gathered  
the kids wherever  
he found them.  
Showed them pictures,  
of all the colors  
that these things come in –  
one next to a cell phone  
to give them a sense  
of scale. One of a boy,  
sitting in a hospital,  
seeming to kneel,  
seeming to pray.  
Told them that this is



what happens when  
you don't watch  
where you are walking  
or if you walk off the road.  
He held his lectures  
under the cover of one tree  
or another: under the fig  
trees, with their fruit  
in full August burst,  
or under the sparse shelter  
of a fruitless pomegranate.  
The people of Marjiyoon  
say, that on his last day,  
he was seen near the cemetery  
sitting in the sprawling shade  
of the twisted branches of an olive tree.

**III**

## Streamers

*“beyond the realm of good and evil, a field” – Rumi*

Mahmoud, the Palestinian puppeteer writes  
a one-man play about a love-struck senior  
with a writers’ block who is distracted by phone  
conversations with his crush across the street. He writes  
a novel about a young man living peaceful and ordinary  
days in the city of his exile. In Mahmoud’s tiny apartment  
hang posters of his homemade star puppet next to Alberto Vargas  
pinups, next to a marionette that sways on its strings,  
with the Mediterranean breeze.

He sits with me now at the hip Barometre dipping  
Armenian sausage slices in cherry sauce chasing it  
with Fatoush and Arak. A puppet himself, he turns  
his head in right-angle sweeps as he turns from one  
diner to another. Says look at all this: our table crowded  
with Palestinians, Lebanese and overlapping mezze plates.  
Tells me, *God ... if there is a god... gave us sausage and tomatoes and Foul  
and radishes and mint and asses and tits and Facebook and bicycles  
and we still find the time to kill each other.*

His brother Hasan was a painter, wielded whimsy just like Mahmoud.  
The lone subject of his paintings was also named Hasan and Hasan  
was everywhere: hovered in all his canvasses, defied gravity,  
defied authority, slept on rooftops, his body a hammock between  
two antennas; floated off the subway as it arced over the Brooklyn Bridge;  
cycled everywhere, long-lashes-closed, care-free, through cities,  
and above villages. But why, everyone who knew him would wonder,  
could he not defy the Mediterranean tide that took him that morning  
as he took a leisurely dive on a vacation day.

So, should we write about intifadas, imprisonments because of intifadas,  
a father taken away for a decade, a brother drowning at first dip  
in the Mediterranean? No, let’s do what Mahmoud does; let us write  
about an ordinary young man, motoring around Beirut, picking up  
a friend on Eid, and lets linger on the silly details, like the fly  
that lands on the cuff of a gas station attendant or the type of cucumber  
that the driver is eating. Yes, let’s write about waking up to another  
curfew day, looking out on the empty streets and looking up to see a sky full  
of mocking kites, streamers wagging, strings tugging at delighted children  
that crowd Nablus’s open windows.

## How to write a poem, according to Souha Bechara

“and I wrote the first faint line.”  
- from “Poetry” by Pablo Neruda

Get the word out,  
let them know that you are ready.  
Don't lose your patience –  
someone will come through.  
A name will be given,  
the name of a general  
in this case, the method  
is left up to you.

\*

Take advantage  
of your privilege:  
meet the general's wife.  
Talk to the wife in French.  
Talk to the wife about aerobics  
in French. Become her aerobics  
instructor. Become her children's  
French instructor. Gain enough trust  
for her husband to ask to meet with you.  
And after you finish your meeting  
with him, reach into your bag  
pull out a gun that you've hidden  
there and shoot him twice.

\*

Drop the gun.  
Let them tackle you.  
Resign yourself to torture.  
Begin an internal resistance:  
sit in their circle.  
Don't let your eyes linger  
on any object in the room.  
Extract yourself  
from your body. Watch  
the man with the hairy hands  
describe the rape of your body  
to the body.

\*

Watch him as he begins  
to beat the body:  
focus on the arc  
of your liberated lower molar  
and make it everything:  
try to guess where  
it landed, crawl to it,  
find it, save it for later.  
Think about putting it back  
in one day. Ignore  
the wheeling of the cart.  
Ignore the stripped cable  
dangling above you.  
Find the tooth.

\*

Make solitary confinement  
your longed-for-solitude.  
Climb the walls:  
press your palms on one  
wall, fingers pointed  
to the ceiling. Press  
your feet against the other  
wall. Build the pressure,  
step up with one foot  
and up with one hand.  
Repeat until your back  
is to the ceiling. Now  
survey the room. Do  
this once at mid-morning  
and once at mid- afternoon.  
Repeat daily. Do this  
for a decade.

\*

Make that crack  
under your door  
your world: Lie down  
and face the door. Look  
past the roaches,  
the fleas,  
and the lice,  
into the compressed light;  
wait for it to be

interrupted. Study the soles  
of your captors.

Match the voices  
with the soles  
match the soles  
with the names.

Catalog them:  
the pigeon-toed,  
the limping soles,  
the canvas ones,  
the wooden ones.

Delight at new soles.

\*

Now find a piece of graphite.

Separate your toilet paper  
into plies. Stretch  
your scroll on the floor.

Prostrate yourself.

Grab the graphite  
between thumb  
and forefinger.

It will feel crippling  
at first, your words  
will be undecipherable,  
but you will  
eventually write  
your tiny words  
with smooth curves.

\*

Set your intentions.

Don't think of meanings,

think of the time

it will take to write

your microscopic epic.

After all, this is about time

not about metaphors

or similes or such.

It's about rhyme

and meter.

So limit hope to the word,

then extend it to the line,

then to the stanza,

then reach out for the winding night.

Now write your first faint line.

## **Mustapha Sa'eed is Alive and Well**

No, Mustapha Sa'eed has not left the building.  
He did not drown himself at that bend  
in the Nile, during the floods. He did not string  
himself up in his pharaonic tomb of a library—  
he was not speaking of the afterlife when he spoke  
of heeding the call of “faraway horizons.” He packed  
his books, his ostrich feathers, his sandalwood,  
and snuck out the back when you were not  
looking. He did not go back to that deflated  
empire of the U.K., he went to roost in the burgeoning one—  
the U.S. of A. He has settled in your home, in your school,  
in your mind. He has become your aerobics instructor.  
He is your children’s French tutor.  
He is a member of your knitting circle.  
He is the one standing behind your wife in Yoga Class.

## Postcards from Rio

### I

Hey, we're all under one democratic sky here.  
Today we marched on a square where slavery was abolished,  
led by the Banda Impanema with their suits and straw hats,  
as they pretended to play their damaged instruments.  
All of us men, all in drag, mostly white faces made paler  
with powder. In the lead, a banner with a meaningless motto:  
"Ylhesman Crisheles." The whole procession speckled  
by the dabbling light of a delirious sun.

### II

Today a new friend, Victor, takes me beyond the span  
of the stone savior's hands, to his home favela in Arcai.  
From the distance, and in the leveling light of day, its terraced  
houses could have been Corfu looking down the Mediterranean;  
but now, as we approach it under the blood orange gaze of the sunset  
it is a brush fire moving down the cliff's slope.

### III

A strange thing happened today. Victor was setting up his turntables  
for a one-man concert in Arcai's square; he climbed this crooked ladder  
with uneven rungs to tap into a stripped power line hung above  
the wall of someone's home. As he stood there in this precarious pose  
negotiating the bare wires, a humming bird darted out of the alley  
to a holding pattern behind him. It dashed in every direction as if  
trying to get around him. And it went like this for a long minute  
that made me think that the bird was heeding the electric cable's hum—  
as if it wasn't for Victor, it would moth dive into the cable's end  
in a failed attempt to converse with the current.

### IV

We're all under one democratic sun here: the rich Cariocas,  
the favela dweller, the crisped Europeans; all stripped of clothing  
color and class. The couple at the edge of the ocean's reach  
in a sweat-sparkled-samba with the sea foaming at their feet.  
A favela in precariously stacked pastels hung above us.  
The whole sandbox cradled in lush cliffs and watched over  
by an open-armed redeemer.



## Dahab

Give me your stoned,  
barefooted, Jesus freaks.  
Your potbellied, acerbic Russian  
tourists. Your freshly red-handed,  
fatigued Israeli veterans. Lay them  
out in cushioned tents. Let them  
smoke our hashish and eat our  
fresh fruit. Here in Dahab,  
where the Bedouin  
found the bohemian.

Year to year we don't  
recognize Dahab as it grows,  
from bamboo shacks  
to a concrete sprawl  
of shops and hotels.  
And day-to-day we don't  
recognize ourselves.  
We get to a point where  
we cannot tell the difference  
between the gypsy girls'  
meows and the stray cats'  
mournful pleas.

This morning, as I drink  
my tea by the sea, I hear  
a squeal and can't figure out  
if it's a fight over a piece  
of discarded chicken  
or one over bracelet money.  
I am starting to catch myself shooining  
cat and girl away in the same  
manner—with a wave of the hand  
and the sharp "Roohi!".  
And they both react the same—  
unblinking and immovable.

The Gulf of Aqaba within reach, still  
in its waking, is indistinguishable  
from the faint blue sky. It shoulders  
Egypt here and that deceptive Saudi  
mountain range there. Calm in its intervention,

as if there is no contention  
between the hedonism of this Dahab  
and the rigid desolation of that desert.

## Bajan Rain

*“...her nocturnal predominance:... her splendour, when visible: her attraction when invisible.”* – James Joyce

Even from here the tide tugs at me  
sets me swaying above the marble  
of the balcony then above the cliff’s edge,  
above the balcony and above the private cove  
that emptied for our morning surf  
and filled with the evening tide.

That was the summer when we had cornflakes  
and cannabis in the morning and scammed  
the “bees” at noon: I taught them windsurfing  
with a faux Rastafarian who taught me  
that I don’t need to know how to surf on water,  
to teach it on land. You see:

*“Jamie is a bee, Billy is a bee  
and they’re stinging everybodee,  
stinging left, stinging right,  
stinging morning through the night.”*

We sent them out for hours, slapstick sailing,  
until we had enough for a fish ball  
lunch, the gas home and the gas  
back to the beach. In the afternoon  
we sat on the balcony stoned again,  
waiting for the Bajan rain. Watched it  
darken our cove, dimple our sea  
then drop its shimmering curtains  
all around our sheltered perch.

Cindy came slinking by us in her batik  
wrap, home from a day of working  
as a mermaid for the Caribbean Submarine  
Company. We pretended to stare and smile  
out on Breezy Hollow, while the hollow’s thunder  
rumbled with our hunger. You see:

*“You think you’re Michael Jackson.  
You go look for action.  
No, no, no, not tonight!”*

The evenings ended as always: Cindy  
swaying between the phosphorus  
and the fireflies, the fireflies and the lost stars  
until they all streaked into one, and I am  
pulled down to the cove again to race the tide –  
traverse its jagged embrace before its daily drowning.

## What else?

What were Friday nights before this?  
The sun-yellow batik curtain flapping  
in the open window, one moment  
ululating your song to the street,  
the other, drawing in to wave  
at all of us gathered in your living room:  
singers of Son Jarocho, a Columbian host  
and me, the Lebanese “Vecino.”  
Behind us, on the dining table,  
Kufta with pine nuts next to Chiles en Nogada,  
next to fried plantains, and in front of us,  
a bottle of Mexican Mescal next to a bottle  
of Lebanese Chateau Masur.

On a Sunday I climb up to the deck  
and lean over the rails to watch you bend over  
the elevated beds to plant the first summer seeds.  
Ximena plays the Jarana, and a call and response  
begins between the two of you. The dark fertile beds  
breathe back their warm promise to the atmosphere;  
sunflowers bud in their sad way where you don't know  
if they are coming or going; and in the center of it all,  
a small Japanese maple that we transplanted from your home  
sprouts red leaves after years of stagnation.  
So when the neighbor steps out to ask what is going on,  
I throw open my arms in a swan dive that spans the whole  
precarious promise – you, the seeds with no guarantees,  
the fickle sunflowers, a maple tree that might have gone as far  
as it will ever go, as if to say: “What else is there?”

## **Sheherazade**

Her room was sealed and self sufficient  
within a cavernous hulk of a drafty house,  
so we never needed to leave it on those winter  
nights. The fireplace seeped smoke, the dimly lit  
corners highlighted South American tapestry,  
woolen dolls and a map of the world porcupined with pins.

She never needed to eat much and was happy  
with a bottle of wine and being within reach  
of the bed. Stories of walking frozen landscapes  
in some Faristan tundra where no westerner had treaded;  
of ghosts in a Guatemalan slaughter house; a king rat  
pouncing on her in the middle of the night and her  
skewering him with a machete; a Palestinian family  
adopting her for their road trip to the Sinai:

a battering of stories that pinned me down but for a day.  
And whenever the stories stopped and that quiet  
awkward moment came doused with desire, another  
battering started – one with the full birth of her hips,  
a battering that always ended with a desperate clawing  
and a sudden collapse – a free fall of her swimmer's  
shoulders coming to rest in a smother of sweat,  
chlorine and pheromones – a potent combination  
she claimed but a futile alchemy when it came to me –  
I spent all the aftermaths thinking about bolting  
from her warm shelter but dreading the cold winds  
of its exterior.