

ABSTRACT

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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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of the requirements for the degree of
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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 18th 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.