

shrouded testaments

Marie Khoury

We weep for you
Mother Lebanon
famine submerges Your valleys
in tears
in toil.

Locusts plague
Your olive groves
devouring our treasure troves
while our Ghosts
loom with Holy Hosts.

A people lost
bearing Your cross.
We fall
and squall with
crying angels
as our blood
fills Your rivers.

We've seen Your faces:
Your agony
Your felicity.
Your travesty
Your divinity.

We are
starved of
Your milk and honey.
we are the Cyclamen
crushed under Their feet.
Death is our only rescuer

starvation our only spoil.

Our accent is a label.
Their religion mired in sin.
A checkpoint is a gamble.

Our children
with battlegrounds
for playgrounds
with sweat for their ocean
shards of glass for sand.

Still we dream
Mother Lebanon
of Your great cedars
standing triumphant.

We dream
of Your brooding mountains
awash in a golden sea.
We listen for your lute and tabla
vibrating sweetly.

We wait
for celestial chimes
and church bells
heralding Your Holy spells.

Mother Lebanon
you have died seven times for us.

But out of Your ashes
as the great Phoenix
You will rise impassioned.

For this is not Your end.
This is Your rebirth.

femme nue

[el'arz liban¹, 1964]

¹translates to "The Cedars of Lebanon", a mountain region located in the Qadisha Valley of Bcharre (North Governorate)

paint by numbers

*Beyond this place of wrath and tears
something alights.*

*Beside the stillness
of my wearied mind,
on this blank canvas*

my paintbrush bleeds.

*Cicadas ring
through yellowing walls
hypnotising my ear.*

*A divine madness overcomes me.
engulfed by the oblivion dark
that rules the night
a breath - of hot wind -
takes out the last simmer of candlelight.
My mind brews with marvellous flashes
of blue and green and blush
purple and yellow and white.*

*Visions swim into my head
I drift into a lyrical sea
passions flow in rhythmic waves
diluted passions flood this page
tangled and entwined
in tortuous lines.*

This canvas

*drenched in melodic strokes
passion surges
and I am submerged.*

*My brush is never still.
it flicks with the flow
the flash
the flux -
it is master over my body.*

*My hand quivers
like an arrow
shot into the hard bark
of a pithy Cedar tree
frozen in a shrill forest.*

*Weeping willows among
a lustrous beam of moonlight
leafy canopies penetrate
bathing flowers
in a spectrum of yellow
white
as honeybees still hum
woodpeckers still drum
from incense-bearing trees
adorned in blossoms
and sweet plum.*

*With the Sun's last
burst of red
a flame erupts within
and the hum and drum
and wood's song
enters the dark hole.*

*Marvellous surges
charge through my veins
sensations I cannot submerge:
this moment
this zenith.*

*My covetous eyes squint
beyond the horizon
the song
the flame
could consume You herself.*

*The turquoise sea still glitters
under this starless sky.
Above this sea
wave Your great cedars
clothed in the greens
of every palate
and none
the verdant hues
of nature's free dream.*

*There is something
about the glint
upon the blue
a melody without rhythm
music without sound.*

arrows, fire, flowers

White hot.
Liberated, chained.
Cigarette in hand,
I exhale.
Flickered ash.
Rebel flame.
No friend but these mountains

Innocence burns.

Visitations of childhood rise;
Spring eves in the souk.

Clouds of smoke swirl
as men inhale their shisha
through
puffs of hearty laughter.

Memory stalls.
I writhe within
the unchained soul
of that young self
a girl of zest
Blissful naivety -

Raw simplicity.

I taste
that balmy summer air

*by the falls in Baakline
one bawdy man and me
my talisman.*

*His skin
olive and luminous
his scent
of musk and wood.*

A single candle.

*Our
shadows
two wicks.
We skinny dip
in soft currents
relishing the tang
of freedom
that so tantalises the tongue.*

*The thrill of scandal
of frivolous expeditions
the liberating sensation
of cold breeze
on our nude bodies.*

Bliss.

ii.

I want to be Her again.

She is Chromium.

I am Her:

femme nue

encased in metal

I am my protector.

*Short locks
legs bare.
Crimson dress
eyes almond
skin
marble
white.*

iii.

*The muse
she is invigorated
while Nature
her curves
her colours
her music -
sing out to me.*

I take a paintbrush.

*It glides along the paper
swirls of scarlet
whisks of ebony
mottled blue.
I paint myself.*

iv.

*O, for
an endless flow -*

*All but drought
thirst
Fill the dried riverbed*

in my head.

*Unborn ideas penetrate
the fibres of my mind
Brewing
Boiling
Bubbling
Barely bursting on the tongue.*

v.

*And yet, a dose of coldness
sweeps it away
and inspiration comes
in search of me.*

*From this forest
I am summoned
the branches of night
among violent fires
or winters's indigo light*

*Here I am
without a face
and it touches me.*

*My mouth
has no way with words
my eyes are blind
and something starts
somewhere
in the silence of my soul*

*fever -
or forgotten wings
and I make my own way.*

*I scribble the first faint
furtive stroke -
faint
without substance
pure
untampered gaffe
Charged with
virginal suggestion*

*I see
the heavens
Unfasten and open
planets
palpitating plantations
shadow perforated
riddled
with arrows
fire
flowers
the winding night
the universe.*

*I, infinitesimal being
drunk with the great
starry void
likeness, image of mystery
feel myself a mere part*

of the abyss

*I wheel with the stars
loose on the wind.*

What delight this is I cannot tell!

My subject enlarges upon itself

becomes defined

delineated

detailed

and the whole

stands complete.

There dwells a magic

in my eyes

a source of envy

to the stars.

This glowing canvas

casts images

the tender heart so craves

aghast at many things so clear

and praying deep

that something

dim in memory

saves.

Furrowed in this heart of mine

Lies a revolution -

just East of West

*[somewhere between
home and nowhere, 1986]*

stripped

*Mount Lebanon,
I stand before you
rimy.
bare.*

*Battered and bruised
by gelid bites
of icy air.*

*Come
Seduce me with your ancient flair
Tell me your secrets
Share your despair.*

*Your fields are canvas
blank weave laid bare.
Your easel
bears the transformation
of a thousand faces
a thousand artists
who lift the corners
of flaccid eyes
willing them to stay.
They dream of you
at home
and yet away
a tragic foray.*

*Brown coalesces with white
Flecks of yellow
launched with spite.*

*Faces painted of
avarice, envy,
pride -*

*Your frame has borne
glances of contempt
sighs of defeat.
Yesterday a beautiful tune
On my lips yet -
today,
a coddled mother held
in your child's bosom.*

*I grip your weeds
sink my toes
into your dying soil.
For you I wail and weep;
no matter your turmoil
I will stand here, hopeless -
forever loyal.*

*This cleft in your chest
will hold the wounded -
You fill my sores with
secrets and wonders
song and myth.
You are my soul's Queen,
Mistress over my body.*

I wish to give you my mind,

But it runs from you.

Just as an artist

*wearry of painting
uninspired strokes
interminably
Goes on a pilgrimage
to her Motherland.
Of the many faces
she has known
This face is all but worthy
Of a master's oils.*

*We drink black milk
and lick grey honey
and dig our graves
in the breeze
as we lie confined.*

*Mount Lebanon,
You are a panderer
You claimed my passions
and swallowed my thoughts.*

*With rouge and mascara
I have donned the visage of temptress,
spinster and woman scorned -*

*Your canvas is
stripped
black
empty.*

*Your rivers
ivory
motionless.*

*Your green fields
black and grey.*

*I breathe you in
I reach out my hand -
Dust.*

*Father, Son and
Holy Ghost
want to talk
but don't touch me -
I'm made of chalk.*

*On hot sleepless nights
a faceless effigy
obscene thoughts
bleed from my sides.*

*I curse you God
who formed the clay
that spun my callused hands
prosaic hands.
pathetic
hands.*

*I am but a bead of dew
plunged into a millpond
Of Epics:
Michaelangelo,
DaVinci -
men of calibre.
I only scrape the surface
Of their lustre.*

*Mount Lebanon,
I hurl myself
into the pit of your deepest crater
and pirouette on your cliffs
let the wind blow me
Into the deep
white
hole.*

*Mount Lebanon,
Your Sons and Daughters
will return to you
when decades have gone
chasing your memory -*

home the penalty/home the escape

*I watched you
in my mind -
while I was gone.*

*I lingered toward you in the Night
when my pillow was cold -
traced the valleys
of your face;
tasted
the perfume of your mulberries
wet in my mouth
soaking sweetly into the tongue -
cerise red
slashes of plum
the hors d'oeuvres
of the young.*

*We danced together
in the gentle throes of
Autumn weather
bathing in fresh canals -
sweet jouissance!*

*You are all I see.
in your glory
in your agony.*

*My filthied cuffs
yellowed fingers
smeared by guilt -*

child of the majhar.

*All that is lost
will be given a name &
will not come back but
will live forever
between the borders.*

*I belong
to no one language.
No
one
country.*

*My border-shaped wound
licked clean by Arabic lullabies
they will not heal her.
Verily the ghosts
never let her breathe.
She is a wisp of unsmoked air
Enduring but ephemeral.*

*I play dress-ups: Oriental Occident; **I become Occidental Orient: donkey**
exotic fruit; **Foolish jehash**²*

*Devoured by doe-shaped eyes; **meandering toward ivory Anglophiles***

*Ceaselessly prodded; **Oozing colonial vernacular***

*Outlander - **We're not mates, mate;***

*Too brown for them, **with their plain-Jane names, all the same***

*Too white for myself; **in my foreign accent I mumble***

*The dowry of being both. **Syllables mispronounced and fumbled -***

*Two faces of Janus kissing – **My mouth is my deepest wound;***

*Mendacious eyes of hubris, flecks of dirt-brown; **mess made by vanity demure.***

²the Arabic word for “donkey”

*Home the penalty
Home the escape.*

*Words of cyanide
seer through newspapers*

A WEAPONLESS WARZONE:

Lebanon past the brink of C

O
L
L
A
P
S
E

*A war on our hearts
a genocide of our stories,
of our ancient past*

**[Lebanon on edge:
crisis sears -
Politicians pledge:
“Our job is done here”]**

They say we are brethren

**No
more
lies.**

You are from Tripoli

She, Damascus,

I, from Beirut.

He, Jounieh³.

*Two sides -
same borderline.*

³ A coastal city in Lebanon

*Two cities -
same soil.
Bred of the same tongue
fed the same enmity*

we see

each

as an

other

never

“sister”

never

“brother”.

*Blue Commonwealth passport
labelled in black ink:
[do you understand
what we lost to bring you here?]*

*My little book of
stamps and spells
locks me out of home.
I am the brown spot roaming
this untainted dome.*

*Home the penalty,
Home the escape.*

the third space

[sydney, australia, 2021]

sister-spirits

i.

it's morning & my grandmother pins

hot colours to the clothesline

i'm still on the date

his bait -

white tiger.

the words

[say something to me in Arabic]

fall backwards down his throat -

that weak voice,

offensively australian.

those

tormented eyes

glassy

glazed

cropped curls,

coloured oat

vanilla bean

complexion -

my words

to him

like chocolate

أنا أبكي علي

he shudders

wet drool

seeping

from the corners

of a ravenous mouth -

yet his eyes

do the devouring.

*to him
i am submissive &
breedable.*

[you're Muslim?]

[Christian.]

[Oh, I just -]

[- assumed?]

*my words are a song but -
his ears are folded back.
my skin is the
colour of earth
and he is the weed
making his home in me -
unwelcome, foul
wilting.*

*and you -
why do you stare?
do you want to eat me too?
do you fantasise about
my almond eyes
my voluptuous thighs
my sensual cries?*

*why do you stare?
this is not a zoo.
i am not a pound of flesh
soused in brown for you.
this body i was born with -
is it everything you want?*

*adieu, white man, adieu.
you will truly know
what you've put me through.*

*god did not light
this blaze in my eyes
for **you** to tell your lies -
to colonise my mind.*

*god did not drench
my tongue in honey
to sing mildly
no -
my tongue is a bristly sponge
my eyes
bags of bleach.*

*god melded me
of blade
of silk.*

*ii.
it's 7 in the morning & the taxi man
brings me to the verandah
teta glides over
eyeballs exploding
dewy skin glowing
[kif rohit?⁴] she whispers
her quietness echoing -
i confess
[ma habitou⁵]
and collapse into her caress.*

iii.

⁴ "How did it go?"

⁵ "I didn't like him, teta"

*in the madbakh⁶
the dying moon illuminates
the map of teta's face
blue rays flow
down the creek of her nose
the valleys of her cheeks
pink as winter rose.*

some faces have no borders.

*we prepare the loubieh
for dinner;
sever the roots
carve away the
brown shoots
scrape away at
exposed flesh
make them clean
perfectly green.*

iv.

*teta's thick knuckles
collect my feet into her lap
incense drifts through
our loose black hair
fairuz⁷ echoes softly -
يا شمس المحبة حكايتنا أغزلي⁸
cloudy arak flowing
that ivory potion
against the deep blue light.
fairuz sings -*

⁶ Arabic for "kitchen"

⁷ A Lebanese musician; "the soul of Lebanon"

⁸ Translation: "sun of love, tell our story"; a lyric from Fairuz's song, *I am for my Lover*

*i can be a patriot
she says Lebanese yet
never **how** Lebanese
she's eulogising home
painting my father as a boy
not yet filled up with pride
she sings and
she's the soul of the Motherland .*

v.

*[حبيبي/habibi: term of endearment]
for more than just a lover
a sister; a mother; a brother
a bawdy black man on a bike
a white lady in a fruit shop -
dad nudges me.*

**i pronounced it wrong.
i pronounced it wrong.
i pronounced it wrong.**

*all I lost
is a tongue
but - keep quiet
they won't ever know.*

*my face is raw
a fig skinned alive
decaying seeds exposed
pink guts now browned
soft skin gnawed
shredded, swallowed -*

i deserve that.

i am a traitor.

*i abandoned the script
written by my olive skin,
my Holy name,
my black hair -*

*women of my kind
eat men like air
we barter our heritage
for sacrilege -
from daughter
to adulterer they
lie with the enemy
mistresses of the West.*

*we stand out when
we stand with
the crowd.*

*we listen to their voices
but drown out our own.*

mutilated tongues

it's true i am
the firstborn daughter
i lost a language and
grew another border
my body is entwined
with gospel and
disorder.

with sunni

 druze

 jews

 shiite

 maronite.

how will i ever sleep at night?

listen for god's word
or huddle in a corner
breathe prayer onto
the western
walls of my breasts.

born with a graveyard
of languages for teeth
a sheet of discordant notes
for a voice

i forget how we say *home*
in my first language
i forget *light*
and *lost*
and *goodbye*

i only know
i miss you [shtatilik]
and *goodnight [sabah al khair]*
and *i love you [bhabek]*
and *who are you? [min ente?]*

neither has given
me the rhyme between
home &
wound.

i mispronounce *habibi*
my father's hopeful eyes
pooling with milk
spoiled milk
my curdling citizenship
dried up by the
orange sun

i am the
snake who sheds her skin
and leaves her black trail
to stain
the sandstone
beneath it -

whose daughter am i
if i forget it all before my
mother?
whose grandchild am i
if my prophecy
expires

before they do?

i am the tether
between now and never
but i wonder whether
the chord's been long severed
two homes
but one is just a loan
like a little lamb
i always roam
who will have me?

where will i go?

home is supposed to
eat up my heart
fill up my head &
hold me in the night -
i see all but a cloud
hear all but a
lowly reverie for
a place i never knew
never will know --
these are the threads
they leave me to sew.

pearls on a string

*teta tells us stories
that amuse and delight
we will sleep a little later tonight!
on sheets sewn with pearls and pink lacy rims;
on pillows filled with dust and crawling things.
on her neck i clasp
teta's pearls on a string,
i close my eyes and
hear her sing.*

*behind her bright eyes
the red sun of ain akrine
flares into existence
she conjures sweet memories
held in polaroids and reveries
her storied mouth props open
and a song falls out -*

a reverie al Libnan

[i have returned,
o children.]

an arab woman's eyes
are like a prayer
min oyoun el-siman
a stream of harps flow
from her mouth:
yalla daena naeish
*bil euyun el layl*⁹

in arabic
even happiness grazes the throat
[h]abibti, my love,
like [h]asad, your envy

these letters
scrape my vocal chords
like an untuned oud¹⁰
like pregnant clouds of shisha
they swirl and seethe
and crumble like the walls
of baalbek.

i called out to you
ya 3uyuni enti
you are
my eyes
my eyes
my eyes

now you turn your backs
to feed your stomachs fat.

i bled

⁹ Translation: "let us live in the eyes of the night", a lyric from Fairuz

¹⁰ a form of lute or mandolin played principally in Arab countries

for you.

i let them tear out my soul
for you.

i gave you sweat
in the mediterranean
i gave you turquoise seas
to cradle wasted bodies
to heaven.

i gave you salt
in this city of plastic
i gave you laughter
i gave you nectar
my honey
my milk -

i gave you prayer
i gave you *holy be our bodies*
i gave you *holy be these streets.*

i was your muse
you let them burn me.
i gave you *hope* -
you let it turn to pain.

my children,
i never left you.

i died seven times
for you.

i shed my flesh

for you.

you shed all but a tear
from your Western thrones.

you pretend you are my children.

your pride in me
is for all but my name.

so sad

so sad

haram

you all say

haram al libnan

while you feed fat your stomachs
on your Western thrones.

you could move
mountains but
your doubt
creates them.

you leave me
behind to crumble
to weep
as the flames
lick the ground
you immolated
let the scent of my cedars
fill your treacherous throats
with guilt.

politics pushed you all away.
they bought planes with

your pensions
profiting from
political tensions -
you are refugees and
home is your detention.

you left me crying
with the saints -
but my wounds
are yours,
i beat in your hearts
and surge in your blood but -

you betrayed
your parents'
sacrifice.

when i return

my fire

in *your* hearts

will burn.