

Dear Fairuz,

Forgive me. For when your songs played in my household during my youth, I often wished for my parents to play English music instead. I did not understand the beauty, the history, or the depth in your voice.

Forgive me.

For when my mother sang your hymns in church, I failed to comprehend why tears fell freely down her face.

Forgive me.

For when my aunty would tell me that your music was sacred, and that it should not be taken lightly, I did not yet grasp the weight of her words.

But Fairuz, do you know that at 19-years-old. I visited Lebanon for the first time as a young adult. I had visited before as a child. But at 19, I had more of my own mind, my own eyes, and my own opinions.

Fairuz, do you know that when I landed at Beirut Airport, and the view of the city unfolded before me, your song *Le Beirut*ⁱ began to play through my phone, filling my ears?

And in that moment, Fairuz,

Tears flowed down my face. Your voice reached deep into me, as though it were speaking directly to the heart of Lebanon itself.

The moon, luminous and soft, winked at me, as if welcoming me home. And the passengers around me clapped as the plane touched down, but I felt as though I were clapping for Lebanon itself, for the land I had yearned to return to.

I had travelled from Sydney to Beirut with my father. My father joined the other passengers in clapping on arrival.

My father, Fairuz.

A man of the Lebanese military. A man of discipline, a man who had seen too much. A man who loves our land and fought for our land. Is a man who will sing along to your songs. No matter how stern he is. I see the way he smiles when he hears your voice.

During that trip Fairuz, I press shuffle on your Spotify page and listen to your poems. They'd play through my earphones into my ears. Like gentle kisses to my ears. And in every note, I found pieces of Lebanon—its resilience, its beauty, its sorrow.

In *El- Bostah*ⁱⁱ, Fairuz. When you share the journey of you traveling around Lebanon on a bus. Of you capturing the beauty of the land, the villages, the people. It reminds me Fairuz, of myself and my trips around Lebanon. But instead I do not take the Bostah.

I sit in my father's 1997 Mercedes. That is my *Bostah*.

When you describe the shakiness of the bus. The Mercedes also shakes, sometimes smoke appears, sometimes the exhaust sings, sometimes we move up and down, depending on the rubble on the floor- it all felt familiar, as though Lebanon itself was gently reminding me of its endurance.

When you speak of the route from *Hemlaya* to *Tannourine*, I remember my own journey from *Tourza* to *Tannourine* at 19. The landscape unfolded like a painting—raw, untouched, and captivating. I did not know what to expect.

But the streams of water greeted me. The water sounded like angels singing, streaming down. The sun which got through the cedar trees that were providing shelter kissed the water and then my eyes became locked on the water.

Those cedar trees, those cedar trees. They stood so tall and strong, like a guard of honour.

The song of the water, echoing through the valleys, was a chorus of nature's purest offering. The cedars—those ancient, towering sentinels—stood as symbols of our endurance, our history.

God himself brought me here.

The birds sang to me. It was as though Lebanon itself was embracing me, telling me that I, too, was part of its story.

My uncle, father, aunty and *Tayta*, talk over each other trying to explain the history of Tannourine to me and its legacy of water.

I remember a friend of mine in Australia. Her family originate from Tannourine. She would only drink Tannourine water exported to Australia. I once would laugh, but now, I understood.

So, I locked eyes on the water longer- for her, I listened to the water longer- for her, I breathed in its aurora longer -for her.

Fairuz, as we drove through Tannourine, we were freezing. In your song, you explain how hot it was, assuming it was summer.

During my trip here, it was winter.

It was cold in the mountains but refreshing. And just as you mentioned in your song, the one passenger who was eating lettuce and the other who was eating fig, it reminds me of my family and I in our car. We pass around a bag of cucumbers and lettuce, eating them away. And as we do, we approach an elderly man on the side of the road in Tannourine. His long white moustache curls, and his eyes, Fairuz his eyes pierce mine. They were a blue like diamonds, like the Mediterranean ocean.

You speak of Alya and how you would never forget her pretty eyes.

These blue eyes, of this man who came from *Tannourine*, I cannot forget.

He asked us where we had travelled from, we said from *Tourza*. And so then, the man with the blue eyes and the white moustache which curled, sang us a poem about the road which connects *Tourza* and *Tannourine*.

The song, similar in ways to your *El Bostah*.

Fairuz, I live in Sydney Australia.

When I arrived back after my trip at 19-years-old, I began listening to your music daily. As I travelled through womanhood, I related to your music even more.

In *Eddaysh Kan Fi Nas* ⁱⁱⁱ, you describe loneliness, in a familiar way. When you speak of walls coming in on you and no body waiting for you. I too, have felt that. When you speak of people waiting for each other, but no body waiting for you. I sometimes too fear, that no one will wait for me.

Loneliness, not only in romance. But sometimes, in community too.

The misconception of Lebanese Australians, my community, here in Sydney. Is not accurate to our people or our land. It is not accurate to our resilience, our hope, our hospitality, our love.

Fairuz, back to my original reference of yours. *Le Beirut* which on landing it brought tears to my eyes. But on departing it had me weeping. After seeing the holy land, with my own adult eyes, after connecting with the land, after praying on the land, after growing deeper in love to myself, our culture, and our land.

Le Beirut not only kissed my ears but kissed my soul.

Your lyrics are pieced into my heart.

I feel the spirit of our people in your harmonies—humble, fruitful, resilient. Their sweat, their toil, becomes wine, bread, and jasmine, and I can taste that spirit in the very air. It fills me. It sustains me.

But how, Fairuz, how has the sweetness of our air turned to smoke and fire?

Why must we bear witness to the blood of children, to the martyrs whose names are etched in the soil?

Why, in 2024, do the numbers of suffering continue to rise?

Why, now, in November 2024, can I not return to Beirut?

Why does the *Jnoub* lie in ruins, unrecognizable from the land of beauty it once was?

When I speak with my *Tayta*, she says to me,

“Lebanon needs a mother to cry over it, a mother to pray over it.”

I now understand where my strength comes from.

It is passed down through the bloodlines of my ancestors—through my mother and father, my grandmothers, and grandfathers. It flows in me, just as it flows through your music. When I listen to you, Fairuz, I hear the voices of all those who came before me.

I did not know love until I fell in love with my land. I did not know possession until I became possessive of it. I did not know passion until I became consumed by the fire that burns for Lebanon.

And just as you sing,

Anti lee, Anti lee^{iv},

I agree. It is yours.

And although I do not feel worthy to say it,

It is also mine.

I send you love and light. I send you hope. I send you thanks.

Charnel Rizk

ⁱ *Le Beirut* (Fairuz, 1987)

ⁱⁱ *El-Bostah* (Fairuz, 1973)

ⁱⁱⁱ *Adesh kan fi nas* (Fairuz, 2013)

^{iv} *Le Beirut* (Fairuz, 1987)