

When the Cedars Wept

I do not know how to write about Lebanon without trembling.

Every time I try, the words come salted, like the sea that keeps trying to kiss the shore of Beirut despite everything we do to her. Every time I speak your name, Lebanon, something in me stands up and something in me falls apart. I have written about cities, about love, about God, about exile, but nothing has ever felt as difficult, as sacred, as dangerous, as writing about you. Because to write about you is to admit that you are both wound and wonder. To love you is to confess that I fell in love with something that was already breaking.

How do I tell you this without shattering you again?

Lebanon, if I could give you one thing, I would give you the ability to see yourself through my eyes. Then, and only then, would you realise how unbearably, irredeemably, heart-wrenchingly beautiful you are, even in your ruin, even in your chaos, even in your poverty, even in your diaspora of children scattered like olive seeds across continents. You would see the way your light clings to us long after we leave. You would see how we defend you in cafés in Paris, in taxis in Sydney, in lecture halls in London, in kitchens in Montreal, like children defending a mother whose sickness the world mocks. You would see how we cannot stop saying your name.

You would see that we never really left.

Because nobody leaves Lebanon. They just carry her elsewhere.

I wish I could explain to strangers that you are not just a place. You are a sound. You are morning azan folded into church bells, you are the gossip of aunties over coffee, you are the taxi driver cursing the government and still offering you a cigarette, you are Fairuz at 7am when the streets are still polite, you are the man selling kaak with a bell tied to his cart as if announcing joy, you are the grandmother shelling peas on the balcony and telling stories of before, always *before*. You are balconies full of flowers even in streets where the buildings are tired. You are weddings in villages where the groom and the bride don't have much but you would think they were royalty by the way the whole town sings. You are the smell of thyme and diesel. You are salt and jasmine and gunpowder memory.

How do I tell them that sometimes I miss the electricity cuts?

Not because I liked the dark, but because in the dark we sat closer. We lit candles, we slowed down, we listened to the silence of a city forced to rest. We laughed about it because what else can a people do? We made jokes about the generator, we memorised the hours of light like prayer times. We lived choreographies of survival, ordinary miracles of adaptation. And we called that life.

I know... I know what they say. That you are too complicated, too damaged, too political, too sectarian, too small to hold all this pain, too loud, too arrogant for your size, too proud for your debts, too fragile to be a country. But that is because they have only ever looked at you with maps and headlines. They haven't looked at you with childhood. They haven't looked at you with hunger. They haven't looked at you with homesickness that bruises the ribcage. They haven't looked at you with the eyes of someone whose grandfather is buried in a mountain village and whose grandmother still waters his flowers.

I have.

I saw you in the summer, when the figs were sweet and the days were long, when cousins came from abroad and the airport became a festival of hugs. I saw you in the winter, when rain made the roads argue and the sea hammered the corniche and men still fished in stubborn coats. I saw you in war documentaries, in my father's voice when it lowered at the word "75," in my mother's sigh when someone mentioned prices, in my uncle's eyes when he stared too long at the news. I saw you in the faces of people who left you and kept talking about you until their last breath.

You see, Lebanon, you do not understand how loved you are.

We write you poems in languages you did not raise us in. We dream you in accents you did not teach us. We cry for you in countries that do not know what a cedar is. We defend you to people who only ever met you through explosions. We keep your old banknotes in drawers with our passports. We make tabbouleh abroad and call it yours even when the parsley isn't right. We name our sons after your mountains and our daughters after your saints and rivers. We return with suitcases full of chocolate for cousins we've never met. We look at our parents' eyes when the plane lands and we know, there is a silence where gratitude and grief sit together.

You don't see that.

You don't see the young man in Australia working two jobs and sending money back to a village he goes to every five years. You don't see the woman in Canada crying on WhatsApp because her father's medicine is no longer available. You don't see the students in Paris watching videos of protests instead of studying. You don't see the bride in Dubai insisting on a zaffeh because she wants the noise of home. You don't see the way we all search for you in each other.

You don't see the helplessness. Maybe I shouldn't show you. It would break your heart to know how powerless we feel watching you suffocate. We sit behind screens, oceans away, watching you line up for bread, watching you protest, watching you rebuild the same street twice in one lifetime, watching your doctors leave, your teachers strike, your young people pack their bags, and we can do nothing but send money and prayers, those two currencies of the diaspora, both necessary, both insufficient. We scroll and scroll and scroll and swallow the guilt of the ones who left. We stretch our hands through the internet and they do not reach you.

I am ashamed, Lebanon.

I am ashamed that I left you incomplete. That I couldn't endure your chaos, your broken lights, your unpaid salaries, your political theatre. That as soon as I breathed a country where services work and roads are paved and systems exist, a part of me relaxed, and another part of me cried. Because I thought, "So it was possible all along?" And then I became angry on your behalf. I became angry that you were not given what other nations take for granted: stability, normality, continuity. Angry that our genius is spent on surviving, not thriving. Angry that our patience is mined like a natural resource.

Do you remember, Lebanon, when you were called the Switzerland of the Middle East? I don't, but my grandparents do. They speak of you as if speaking of a lover in youth, glowing, impossible, extravagant, a place of theatres and cinemas, of poets and politicians at the same table, of open doors and open hearts. They speak of picnics in the mountains, of trains that once ran, of a port that bustled, of downtown before it was wounded. They say, "*we had everything.*" Then they look away. That "had" is a knife. And yet, in the same breath, Lebanon is a shroud. You are a coffin carried too many times by shoulders too young to bend.

You are smoke rising from wounds that refuse to close, a thousand funerals echoing inside a land too small to contain its own grief.

I sometimes wonder: what would you have become if you had been left to grow, not to bleed? If every fifteen years you were not asked to start again? If every generation did not have to carry both memory and reconstruction? If your children did not have to say the sentences that suffocate the future: "I love my country, but there is no future for me here."

That sentence is an earthquake.

That sentence is a funeral where the deceased is possibility.

What is a nation if its children cannot imagine themselves growing old in it?

You have produced the most loyal, restless, talented people who have built empires in every corner of the world, restaurants, universities, ministries, churches, labs, companies, and yet they hesitate to stay with you. Do you know how cruel that is? To be loved but not chosen. To be adored but not secured. To be sung about but not invested in. To be danced to at weddings but not trusted with children's futures.

We did not leave because we did not love you. We left because we loved you and we were tired of watching you suffer. We left because we didn't want to become bitter at you. We left because the electricity cuts were not just romantic, they were exhausting. Because ambition is also a right. Because parents wanted to feed their kids without begging. Because dignity is not propaganda. Because we got tired of watching officials feast while the people fasted. Because corruption is not a personality trait, it is violence. Because you asked too much of us and gave too little back, and we were human, and we broke.

And yet.

And yet.

Say your name out loud and watch what happens to us: *Lebanon*.

It is a small name, made of soft sounds and hills. But it carries ports, mountains, saints, prophets, poets, martyrs, brides, wars, dabke, weeping, laughter, resilience, and arrogance. It carries a thousand history books and a thousand kitchen recipes. It carries Christ walking in Cana and Adonis dying on a river. It carries the Phoenicians sailing cedar ships and young

people in Hamra holding coffee. It carries grandmothers with their gold hidden in scarves. It carries fathers smoking on balconies. It carries songs that have survived dictators and invasions. It carries everything.

How dare a country so small contain this much?

Maybe that is why the cedar wept.

Maybe the cedar, that patient elder of our flag, wept because it could not carry the weight of our love and our wounding. Because it has watched generation after generation pledge, "We will not leave you," and then watched their passports expand. Because it has seen children of Zahle grow in Melbourne, sons of Tripoli pray in Sweden, daughters of Saida teach in Qatar. Because it has heard every promise to stay and still watched the airports swell in August. Because it has heard every speech about sovereignty and still watched foreign hands arrange our future.

The cedar wept because it knew: we love you, but we cannot always live with you.

Isn't that the cruelest kind of love? The love that says, *"You are my home, but I will build my life elsewhere."* The love that says, *"You are my first language, but I will speak in another tongue to feed my family."* The love that says, *"I will marry abroad, but I will bring my children to see you in the summers."* The love that says, *"I will die in Australia, but bury me in the village."*

Bury me in the village.

We say it so casually, as if we are not asking to cross death to return. As if we are not confessing that all our success abroad is still not enough to heal the homesick bone.

I have walked in cities that function. I have walked in streets where the traffic lights obeyed, where people queued, where the cost of living was predictable. I have seen skylines taller than our mountains, trains faster than our thoughts, hospitals richer than our ministries. I have tasted cuisines from places that never knew war. I have seen calm. But nowhere, nowhere, did I see an old woman stop me in the street to ask who my father was so she could tell me she knew my grandfather. Nowhere did I see a people who could be breaking and still offer me coffee. Nowhere did I see a teenager dance dabke on asphalt with so much pride for a

country that has given him so little. Nowhere did I see men gather to rebuild a neighbour's shop without a council, without a budget, without permission.

This is what the world does not understand: we do not belong to Lebanon because of what it gives us. We belong to it because of what it makes of us.

It makes of us people who can laugh in ruins.

People who can cook feasts during shortages.

People who can switch languages mid-sentence like changing gears.

People who can make a party out of a power cut.

People who can take a blow and stand up beautifully, hair still done.

People whose pain does not make them bitter but generous.

People who, even when exiled, still say "back home."

Back home.

What a violent phrase. What a tender one. We use it for a place that did not pay our salaries. We use it for a place where we could not find medicine. We use it for a place that sent us away. We still call it home. Because home is not an efficiency. Home is a wound you return to.

Sometimes I think you are a woman, Lebanon.

A woman who was once the most beautiful in the room. A woman courted by empires. A woman envied by her sisters. A woman who loved many and was loved by none the way she deserved. A woman who gave too much. A woman who hid bruises with perfume. A woman who raised brilliant children who left to study abroad and did not all come back. A woman who keeps her old wedding dress in the cupboard though the groom is gone. A woman who still cooks for ten even when she lives alone. A woman whose laughter fills a house, whose anger empties it. A woman whose suitors promised her kingdoms and left her with debt. A woman who will not be spoken of cheaply. A woman who will not give up her jewellery. A woman who knows she is beautiful even if the mirror is cracked.

And we, her children, are torn between worship and complaint.

We kiss her forehead when we land. We curse her traffic. We hug her relatives. We complain about the system. We flirt on her beaches. We rage at her politicians. We dance at her

weddings. We cry at her funerals. We spend our last dollars on her man'ousheh. We tell stories of the village. We pack gifts for her people. We swear we are done. We come back next summer.

Tell me, how do you leave a country like that?

You don't. You just orbit.

Lebanon, you think you are small. You look at your borders and you see a sliver on the map. You see neighbours larger, richer, louder. You see the news about yourself and you think, "This is all I am?" But you forget that you exist in multiplication. You exist in every city where a Lebanese flag is hung at a restaurant. You exist in every church where Maronite hymns are sung far from Qannoubine. You exist in every Muslim prayer where someone's father taught him the adhan in a Beirut apartment. You exist in poetry slams in New York when a girl says "My grandmother was from the mountains." You exist in Brazilian families whose great-grandfathers left from the port. You exist in West African shops owned by men named Fadi and Hassan. You exist in Australian suburbs where Arabic is shouted across backyards. You exist in weddings in Europe where the zaffeh enters and suddenly everyone is Lebanese.

You are the country of the scattered.

The Bible speaks of people scattered by God; you were scattered by history, economy, politics, stubbornness, ambition. But scattered seeds become forests. Our diaspora is not absence. It is your extended bloodstream. It is your nervous system across the earth. It is your voice in parliaments you did not build. It is your food in streets you never paved. It is your music in cars that never drove up your mountains.

We are not the ones who left. We are the ones who carried you.

But you must stop thinking you are only your suffering.

Yes, you are a body of grief. Yes, you are a litany of names. Yes, you are mothers with framed pictures of sons who did not come back. Yes, you are streets that remember bullets. Yes, you are buildings with scars. Yes, you are anniversaries we dread. Yes, you are the August that silenced us. Yes, you are a cry that has not ended. But you are also the laughter after the cry, and that laughter is holy. You are the way we make fun of our own tragedy. You

are memes in the middle of collapse. You are weddings in the middle of bankruptcy. You are concerts in the middle of protests. You are café openings in the middle of despair. You are, somehow, still, against all logic, life.

I want to tell you a secret, Lebanon.

The world envies you.

Not your politics, not your economy, not your governance, no, keep those. The world envies your ability to turn everything into story. You have no ordinary days. You have relatives to visit, saints' days to celebrate, exams to pass despite no power, a neighbour getting married, a cousin coming from America, a funeral that becomes a reunion. You have poets in grocery stores. You have philosophers driving taxis. You have singers selling vegetables. You have doctors opening restaurants. You have a people too big for their infrastructure.

This is why our writing about you is always too emotional, because you are too emotional. You do not do anything halfway. You do not love halfway. You do not hate halfway. You do not mourn halfway. You do not welcome halfway. You do not forgive halfway. You are excessive, dramatic, theatrical, Mediterranean, Levantine, ancient. You are the place where God may have walked and where people now double-park. You are sacred and ridiculous at once. You are incense and exhaust fumes. You are this impossible, dazzling contradiction, and we, your children, are shaped by it.

And yet, I am afraid for you.

I am afraid that one day you will believe the lie that you are not worth saving. That you will internalise the corruption of your leaders as your own. That you will tire of rebuilding. That you will forget your poets. That the young will forget Arabic, will forget the smell of zaatar, will forget the names of villages. I am afraid of the slow erosion, not the sudden blast. I am afraid of forgetfulness more than of disaster. Because disasters, we survive. Forgetfulness, we do not.

So listen to me.

You are worth saving.

Not because your mountains are pretty, though they are. Not because your beaches are warm, though they are. Not because tourists once loved you, though they did. You are worth saving because of the memories you hold. Because every stone in you is a testimony. Because you taught oceans to trade. Because you gave the world alphabets. Because you taught us to be many in one. Because you made neighbours of Christians and Muslims and Druze and Armenians and strangers and Syrians and Palestinians and everyone who ever walked your streets. Because you are proof that coexistence is messy but possible. Because you carry a hospitality that is divine. Because you fed refugees when you could not feed yourself. Because you made a culture out of welcome. Because you kept singing.

Let me end with this, beloved country of my unrest:

If I could give you one thing, I would give you the ability to see yourself through my eyes. Then and only then will you realise how utterly luminous you are in your brokenness. How every crack in you is a window for light. How every scar is actually a script written by survival. How every leaving child is still a tether. How every August, every war, every crisis, every betrayal, every economic humiliation, all of it, failed to kill your generosity. You would see that you are not the failures of your governments. You are the faithfulness of your people. You are not the headlines. You are the hugs at the airport. You are not the explosions. You are the human chains passing water to strangers. You are not the debt. You are the woman frying sambousek for the whole street. You are not the collapse. You are the rebuilding.

You would see that we do not pity you. We ache for you.

You would see that even when we go far, we speak to you. We write to you. We dream in your geography. We say “back home” and mean you. We say “the village” and mean you. We say “I miss the sea” and mean the very stretch of your coastline that knows our footsteps. We say “I want to be buried there” and mean your soil, specifically yours, not just any holy ground, yours.

You would see that you are the great, inconsolable love of millions.

You would see that the cedars did not just weep from sorrow, but from awe. Because what other land could hold this much love and this much loss and still be wanted?

I know now: to be Lebanese is to live with a permanent homesickness, even when you are home. To be Lebanese is to make peace with the ache. To be Lebanese is to say “Alhamdulillah” and “Merci” in the same sentence. To be Lebanese is to argue about politics and then share dessert. To be Lebanese is to tell the world, with a half-smile, “We will be fine,” even when you are not. To be Lebanese is to write this, crying, in another country, and still feel unworthy to speak of you.

When the cedars wept, Lebanon, it was not just for what you lost.
It was for what you still are.

And I, far, near, exiled, returning, in love, exhausted, I will keep writing your name until my hand forgets how to write anything else.

Malek Chalhoub