

## Thoughts on Etel Adnan

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Shortly before embarking on a trip to Lebanon in the summer of 2009, I wrote a letter to Etel Adnan. I did not know Etel, nor had I even seen her in person. I knew her writing, of course, and therefore felt her to be near. It was her writing that had partly inspired the trip to Lebanon, acting as one of the gates through which we had already passed on our way. I composed the letter on a small typewriter while sitting on a patch of grass sloping down into Lake Washington, on the eastern edge of Seattle. I don't remember what I wrote, but I remember staring at the lake, attempting to summon some literal sense from it for my own, unforthcoming. The lake felt ancient, yet regenerated in each instant, the tenderized lung of a much larger organism—I felt brief in comparison. I didn't know what I wanted to say, only that I wanted to, openly and with gratitude. I was writing as a reader and admirer, to share with Etel my feelings about her work, and to tell her that my partner, also a poet, and I were soon to be in Beirut, a city partly constituted—or reconstituted—for us, out of Etel's writing. Thinking about Beirut, at the far eastern edge of the Mediterranean, I felt Etel's presence, and envisioned, as if conceiving a sculptural form in air, her life as the construction of a bridge originating in childhood, and out into the ancient, regenerating world, as a way to participate in its buoyancy, while transcending it for another from which to look back, the bridge a moving suspension of a lifetime of acute, deeply felt perceptions. One would need to be marooned to build a life out of such careful consideration, into and beyond the substance that keeps one there. I was, and am still, getting ahead of myself. I typed the letter and mailed it to Etel in Paris. To my ecstatic surprise, Etel responded almost immediately—by email, eight sentences, written the day (July 27<sup>th</sup>) she read my letter. She was extending an invitation to visit her in Beirut, where she was also soon going to be.

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Etel's writing feels as though it is being shared directly with its readers, addressees born of the supremely generous relationship Etel upholds with the world and its contingencies—born, that is, out of the challenge of being present, in the expectation that, without having to be so willfully summoned, you will be by the energy and rigor of the love so expressed. Her writing therefore is correspondence, engendering faithful responsibility on the part of the reader. I consistently emerge from Etel's voice and vision catalyzed into direct correspondence with my own. She is one of the writers whose works I always keep close at hand, and yet, I am always taking leave of them, necessarily, for both the known and unknown worlds her works insist be confronted, as well as created by conscious and subconscious induction, without losing my hand and heart on what is real, what is actually taking place. I am writing this from a *ryokan* in Shimonoseki, Japan, on the far western edge of the island of Honshu, the site of the epic battle between the Genji and Heike clans in the strait of Kanmon—separating Honshu from Kyushu, my paternal grandparents' homeland—in which, on March 24, 1185, the infant emperor Antoku was sacrificed to the strait, with the promise of entrancing a greater kingdom beneath the waves. It is not entirely hyperbolic to say that my way of traveling has been influenced by Etel—many of my models have been literary works and works of art, circular mirrors placed at the head of each site of devotion, reflecting the motions of exactly where I am standing—the straits, daily sacrifices, resounding membranes behind me. Etel's work has sharpened, in fact has helped to invent, my own senses. Her writings proliferate as wisdom to grieve before the visage propped upon the altar. Responding to her felt—and feels—a matter of ensuring the world of her art be underwritten by

one small light among the infinite.

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Writing recently to my friend, the poet and critic Thom Donovan, I remarked on how I was beginning to think of Etel as elemental, as water ... “and I become water, friend of water” ... “That’s what we are: beings made through the contact of water with stone, of a chilly sunset with pure geometry” ... synthesizing both center and margins of the matrix of her and others’ experience. How else to build a life for one’s self than to become the impossible element? I scribbled a note while re-reading *Of Cities & Women*: “I receive the distinct impression that Etel is the embodiment, the personification, of the earth’s genius of synthesizing elements,” though I would qualify this now by saying that the genius also resides in the ability of the earth’s individuals to apprehend this nearly invisible synthesis, to see it manifest, and as still wet. The effect is that every perception is *still wet*, edges resounding to challenge the settlement of the perception, hovering that it might grow to touch its source. Without being facetious, I must ask: How old is Etel? And I mean, not by conventional calibrations, but ... is Etel the youngest person who ever lived? Is she the oldest of all novitiates, reincarnated in the things she sees, as they in her? I feel the evidence clarifying a greater, if even more ephemeral, existence, holding anchor the world among mountains and paintings, bodies of water and language, wires, windows, women and profusions of architecture, immemorial antagonisms, indivisible passions, among cities and seasons, the self in florid, questing exile. By Etel’s writing being a generous expression of her life in real time, she has found perhaps the grounds for a perfected exile—that of eternal, however dispersed, and however challenging, solace in the minds and lives of her works and her readers, real time turning from overwhelming discreteness to revolving universality. This is not to say that Etel is not *herself Etel*—grounded in her own life, sitting at a window, asking questions of the things she sees, sharing these things and spending time with the people she loves—but that she has found her inherent language in love. My relationship with Etel and her work feels ancient and wholly regenerating, as love must be to create the islands it connects. It demands the ink stay wet, that the questions divined stay true. As it keeps me moving, so I have to keep moving with and through it.