

## **In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country by Etel Adnan**

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(after E.A.)

### **PLACE**

How does the nomad speak of place, much less of home, in a world of movement and migration? How does the double-exile—“exiled from another exile”—negotiate place beyond a series of temporary shelters for the displaced? If for Adnan home is always “another country,” where might the restless mind and spirit find respite, find rest?

Etel Adnan writes through William Gass’s 1960s story “In the Heart of the Heart of the Country,” an early experiment in metafictional world-building, and through Gass’s “categories” she finds new vistas for explorations of place, memory, and history. Most of the pieces here, written from a variety of locations and contexts over the last thirty years, use this structure to not only explode conventional modes of memoir and political writing, but also to trace the development of memory-work and world-writing through the formal constructions of a kind of para-genre that seems as uncannily “right” as it is unsettling. Irruptions in time and place, bizarre repetitions, motifs that function diachronically as well as compositionally—such elements function here not as clever avant-garde gestures but as rigorous attentiveness to the actualities of memory and narrative in that situated writing practice that is always grounded “in place,” even if one is always leaving, always running, always moving, unsettled.

### **MY HOUSE**

Writing here is the practice of memory—not as the mere recollection or retelling of events, but as the making-present of the past, the scripting of that present-making in writing’s work. What else is memory-work than the lived experience, in the now, of what we tell ourselves is “past,” even as we experience such pasts, refigured and rewritten, in the sensual details and tangled contexts of the present? “Memoir” is one name for such a genre; yet here Adnan goes well beyond making memory “literary.” Instead history—both personal and public—is always happening now, made manifest in the writing itself. Perhaps we are encountering a lyrical expression of that historical materialist practice that Benjamin called for in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*: “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ . . . It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger.” Writing in a time of war, in many times of many wars, Adnan negotiates that danger as a practice of the everyday, where “to fill one’s mind with the apprehension of the Sunday paper there, at the door” is to charge the present with that worldliness that can shatter the domestic bliss of willed American ignorance. To refuse to look away—that might be said to be Adnan’s charge here, her source of both apprehension and beauty, of pain and fleeting truths. If there’s nostalgia here, it’s only for the possible futures that so many failed revolutions have offered up, their convulsive beauty still dancing in the flames. . .

### **WIRES**

Contemporary history is in many ways a history of borders and enclosures, even as the exile, the refugee, and the migrant become the emergent figures of global culture in the twenty-first century. From concentration camps to internment camps to refugee camps, the history of this transformation could be traced through the history of barbed wire, that brutally simple tool so necessary to modernity’s management of both nature and unruly subjects. Or, as Adnan puts it, “the thread of this century is made of wire.” The exilic should never be romanticized, for each crossing marks the (gendered, racialized) body with wounds and barbs. As well as with a hunger,

for justice, retribution, return: “Each one of us is a dog attached by steel threads to a purpose, waiting for lightning to strike.”

### **POLITICS**

The writing here is clearly politically engaged, but in such a deeply embodied and singular way that it avoids easy moralizing or sanctimonious pieties. Rather, it invites us in to the workings of mind in a knotted time of wars and fragile attachments, of domesticity and natural beauty and the love of cats or music or the moon as the bombs continue to fall, “somewhere else” perhaps, but fall through that beauty as well, so that political commitment is at once a fierce attentiveness to the everyday world as we inhabit it, as well as the tangled connections to places, people, and landscapes that continue to be ravaged and devastated by American power. Such a political writing makes for melancholic song, but braced and brazen nonetheless. Or, as she says of the singer Oum Kalsoum, she “sings ‘on target,’ like a whip to whatever in each of us is dormant.”

### **MORE VITAL DATA**

“To Be in a Time of War,” the piece that closes this collection, consists of a series of sentences phrased in the infinitive, charting the daily BEING during the “official” beginning of the current illegal military action against Iraq. Its charting of actions both domestic and global, of feelings seemingly trivial or defeated, of attempts to deal with the distant war from Paris and California, from the site of Empire, in the midst of indifference or cynicism, is exemplary in its navigation of a sincerity that is heartbreaking without becoming self-congratulatory. And still: “To yearn for spectacular suns.” “To do as is things mattered.” To write through, and back, and forth, into another possible future.