

## **Etel Adnan's Master of the Eclipse**

**Sharon Doubiago**

I've known of—heard of—Etel since the 70s. She was the major/significant 1960s teacher at Dominican College of a significant friend of mine back then, who always talked of her. Jack Hirschman always talked of her, pointedly, to me. The Middle East concern is a deep one of mine—she or Jack sent me her booklength poem, *The Arab Apocalypse*, while I was in Paris, in Winter 1991, for the birth of my grandson and, it turned out, the first Gulf War. I open that book anywhere and I am back on that little pad on Rue de Varienne. The horror and the triumph poetry and art always are.

And through the years her nights with Simone on Wednesdays in Spec's in North Beach, SF: simply unforgettable. My daughter, Shawn Doubiago, did her Masters (SF State) on *Sitt Marie Rose*, and spent time interviewing them in their Sausalito and Paris homes.

Last winter there they were several times at Spec's, Etel and Simone, beautiful in some otherworld sense, just like always. Etel seemed more sad than usual and happy too, for the same reason all of us were to be there at that legendary Wednesday night table in Spec's. That she was there among us! Beautiful awesome woman.

*Speech Given on the Occasion of Etel Winning the PEN Oakland Award in 2010:*

Etel Adnan was born in Beirut, Lebanon in 1925 of a Christian Greek mother and a Muslim Syrian father. "Beirut in the thirties was itself a preadolescent city: newly installed as the capital for a nation carved out by the Allies from Syria. It smelled of jasmine and orange blossoms, and you could look at the sea from almost any street." *Master of the Eclipse* is a collection of memoir stories ranging from girlhood in Beirut to adulthood in Paris and the Bay Area. (For many years Adnan taught Philosophy of Art at Dominican College in San Rafael.) The mysterious, near-omniscient narrator chronicles, in breathtaking, heartbreaking, metaphorical stories, the eclipse of not just the Arab world but of the Western one also. She has been chronicling the apocalypse (*The Arab Apocalypse* is one of her booklength poems) for much of her life in poetry, painting, criticism and fiction. Her novel, *Sitt Marie Rose* (1978) is considered a feminist classic of the Lebanese Civil War.

"What are poets for in these destitute times?" "The storyteller as poet as vigilant angel" tells us. The title story, brilliant and stunning both poetically and politically, is of the Kurdish Iraqi poet, Buland al-Haidari, and the poetry festivals at which she encountered him in Baghdad and Sicily, and his death from alcoholism in London in 1996. It is the story of the downward spiral of the poet in exile from his beloved country as it is both self-destructing and being destroyed. "I'm a living wound because I know they're setting fire to my country because they envy its immemorial mystic power." Credited with having brought free verse to Arab poetry in the 40s, Buland's greatest shame is that he loved Saddam Hussein who in turn loved poetry. Who is the Master? On first reading I assumed Saddam but on subsequent readings I've seen Buland, then his scholar, the University of Virginia "professor-Agent...the Big Eye, the guardian of a supreme power," the exact equivalent of the military, the bombers, the movie directors and journalists, all of us (except those going righteously mad) in our bullet proof jackets.

The ironic symbolism and metaphors, if those literary terms work here, are profound. Ibn Arabi, Walter Benjamin, the angel of history, Paul Klee's angels (the painter who in WWI painted airplane wings), prostitutes, suitcases in Syria of counterfeit money from California, lovers driven mad for the Muse they cannot touch, and the narrator's love of women. "American Malady" is surely one of the most ironic but lyrical pieces written in recent history: refugees trying to get to the America that's destroying their country. "Better to be in the tornado's eye than in its path." The making of the movies, the making of the news: the boy who digs up, washes and delivers real corpses for the Hollywood movie mogul who refuses to pay him the small asking wage. "Love me," Um Kulthum was singing, 'even if you have to curse me.'" "They ended up in Lebanon with only their clothes on, and Father's black little radio." A son dead and a father insane because of that radio, those voices in all their different languages penetrating their souls. "All the shelling and the dying...they announced everything except the sorrow." That's what Adnan's stories are about most of all, the sorrow. The eclipse yes, yet: "They say 'Palestine smells good. She's worth our lives.' But I'm not going to die. How can I? I'm not yet born. I will be born over there, on the road to Haifa, as in the days of my grandparents