

Tribute to Etel Adnan

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"I know very well how contradictory one must be in order to be truly consistent."

Pier Paolo Pasolini

"Some people are prisoners of the decisions they make."

Etel Adnan

1.

Some time in early 2002, I stood in front of the Middle Eastern literature collection at Woodland Pattern Book Center in Milwaukee, WI, where I worked. A number of things had happened: in February of 2001, we hosted Marshall Weber who performed his piece "Bad JewJew." The details of the performance are vague to me now, however, I came away feeling the need to address my deficient knowledge about the Israel and Palestine conflict. I had also just become intimate with an Arab-American woman who watched the performance with me and answered all of the initial questions I had.

The suburb where I grew up was called "the bubble" by its own inhabitants. I emerged at 18, having to find my way out of the inhalant of the catechism, bad history books and a ratcheted down sense of personal agency. I looked to writing to return me to the world.

Then, the cataclysm of September 11th revealed the state of our country's relationships with the world where I wanted to be a citizen. To say it was an impetus to start paying closer attention feels like an understatement. Woodland Pattern had quite a few titles by Etel Adnan. May be it was the symmetry of her name that initially appealed to my ear, the syllables, the doubled up vowels. The book I picked up was *The Spring Flowers Own & The Manifestations of the Voyage*. When I open it now, I see my pencil markings on the first page:

The morning after
my death
we will sit in cafés
but I will not
be there
I will not be

I often repeat these lines. In addition to instantly recognizing Etel as a writer of international significance, reading this book allowed me to make my own way with the narrative position of the post- or trans-mortem "I" as a response to my own experiences of injustice. I soon read her articles in *Al Jadid* and learned more about the Lebanese Civil War so I could better read her classic, *Sitt Marie Rose*.

In Spring of 2002, I wrote her a letter I have no copy of, but I'm sure it was friendly, formal and contained little of my personality. I invited her to come to Milwaukee to give a reading. In response, I received what has become one of the joys of my life; a long inky letter filled with thoughts about poetry, seas (or lakes), and *Moby Dick* – travel itineraries, current events, details of daily life, optimism/pessimism, predictions and camaraderie. This one was signed: "We'll stay in touch. Love, Etel"

2.

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I quoted Pasolini and Adnan at the beginning of this tribute. Both have a profound understanding of the violence caused by people's inability to hold space for many points of view (it's an intolerance for the other, which, to my mind, translates as an inability to love). Both have experienced and were endangered by wars in their homelands and survived; disillusioned, aware of their own mortality, obsessed with new possibilities.

One of Pasolini's most revealing films is his documentary *Love Meetings* (1964), where he interviews Italians about their attitudes toward love and sexuality. He says: "Silence is guilt... To your love let there be added awareness of your love." Adnan's latest publication is a must-read essay called *The Cost for Love We Are Not Willing to Pay* (DOCUMENTA (13), Hatje Cantz, 2011). She says: "...love in all its forms is the most important matter that we will ever face, but also the most dangerous, the most unpredictable, the most maddening. But it is also the only salvation I know of."

What I originally thought to say about the six lines above is that the reader is asked to know contradiction – the narrator is part of a "we" that will sit in a café and also not be there. "The morning after my death" is the moment of potential revelation – at the organic level life and death are in unity. "We" is the hinge. "We" is a people, a couple, "we" is I, "we" is how an I can go on, assuming the condition of love, and believing, as I do, that we can be bio-chemically and beneficially altered by emotions produced through our connections to other beings and communities.

In study after study, scientists have determined that subjects who are reminded of their own mortality become aggressive toward those perceived as different ("terror management theory" has been developed from Ernest Becker's classic *The Denial of Death*). Etel's work often makes me swoon – I want to be courageous/I don't want to be neurotic... but *Madonna mia!* (as my grandma says). Her "heart of the matter" – it is our responsibility as individuals to use our intelligence to come to terms with our death awareness, or as Becker provocatively put it, "to practice dying," as opposed to giving in to the primal impulse to wage war, ecological destruction, social/economic injustice.

The cost for love is "revolution in one's life" and "by not paying the price for what it takes to change the world, the world will change in its own way, will change anyway..." I appreciate Etel's manner of expressing pessimism, as it also holds such optimism by the very fact of her endurance. She offers a maneuver of the spirit that could course us away from doom, which I'll phrase as a proverb, and it may even sound like a contradiction – create new and repeatable experiences with each other.

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