

Sunken Suns

Anne Waldman

The Middle East lives its destiny. No sound seems trivial or ordinary. The power of terror is totalitarian. Bullets crack and resonate in the amphitheatre that is Beirut.

— Etel Adnan, *Sitt Marie Rose*

*My body is a rag to be sewn to the earth.
O you who sews worlds, sew me!*

— al-Ma c arri

I spent the other day reading aloud—performing—the extraordinary *L'Apocalypse Arabe /The Arab Apocalypse* in a room of one. I experience this text's magnitude of display and yearning and urgent alarm. Its measure of riot and desperation and power. The poem in its integrated sections shoots off the page, disrupts conditioned space, explodes in the ears and thrums the inner drums; it unleashes a linguistic slash/ breach / upheaval. I made gestures, arms flagellating, and hands jabbed the air finding release in spastic display. I supplicated. I improvised finger-mudras and worked taut, awe-inspiring expressions upon my face. I let my mouth expand to hold the whole of ancient "Arabia", then I revised the map and considered all the turmoil continuing, now, ever, and the rest of the world's collaboration in that endless suffering of *problem-not-solving*: Israel and Palestine. I included Somalia, Libya, Tunisia, Syria, Yemen. I knocked my head with my fist, I looked up to pray again, then bowed and prostrated on the ground of the poem. My eye-mudras moved in all directions of space attempting to indicate... no manifest... no enact Etel Adnan's prophetic glyphs.

Thus I put my whole body into the codes and lingual soundings of this animated and visual text, her *Codices*. May people of the future decipher these runes! I lay down for the arrow-like glyph between "Mexico! and "bed undone" (II) I splayed myself on the floor before "great Inca". I stamped on the ground before "Ishi cried this morning" (IX) After "I painted the sun in the middle of the sky like a flag" (XII) I danced and swirled and repeatedly pointed to the sky and beyond. I held my belly, clutching it three times before singing out "the yellow sun of menopause" (XVIII) . I stuttered and crawled after intoning "in the underground blackroom always black is experience" (XL). I groaned "There have been pounds and pounds of decomposed flesh tons of suffering" (L) and let blood symbolically gush from a wounded-long-gone body and moaned, and moaned. I took the text's ideograms as clues for performance and chanted "HOU HOU HOU HOU HOU" and "DOUM! DOUM! DOUM!"

An enactment of the battleground, measuring my own echolocation. An enactment of the psyche, measuring the relief the purge the terror this ritual mirrored. I spooked myself.

Who can say it, who says it, what are the words to call out and carry and implode this apocalypse? This is the closest to—Etel's text—I have come.

What she attempts to do in language is a crisis upon an altar, a *crise* of the heart.

I rested then took up the *agon* again, I retreated, then called to others.

They—apprehensive—left me in my retreat of poetry and prophecy and penance.

I noted

“a blue sun receding a Kurd killing an Armenian an Armenian killing a Palestinian...”

I noted

“What a purple and violent abyss broke loose on the Primordial land of Syria?”

I noted

“Treason floats down the smooth surface of the Euphrates like a woman”

I noted

“When they eat the Palestinian’s liver before he’s even dead”

I noted

“Imam Ali dances over nuclear blast”

I noted

“we crucify Gilgamesh on a TANK Viking II reaches Mars”

I noted

“And under the blue clouds of Babylon turtle doves announce a thunder”

I noted

“There have been meadows covered with human skin under the Arabian moon”

I considered all the colors of Etel Adnan’s “suns”, her *voyelles*, the red dots that are sunspots of the stuttering amplitudes of the poem, or a floral sun with petals of gold...

I noted her Mao and Rimbaud, the razor’s edge.

I conjured my own physical/spiritual displacement. I recalled sleeping on the desert near Abu Simbel, sickle moon, in my young girl coven, 1962. I felt the sun’s heat early in the morning.

I recalled the airport in Beirut, machine guns everywhere. The fear in people’s eyes. Rain obscuring the sun.

The root of the Arab word *nashid* (song) is the voice, the raising of the voice and the recited poem itself. According to Adonis, the Arabs of the pre-Islamic period felt the recitation of poetry a talent in and of itself, distinct from composition.

“...listening was essential to the comprehension of words and to musical ecstasy (*tarab*)”

“The actual performance of poetry had its own rules in the pre-Islamic period which survived into later ages. Some poets, for example, recited standing up, while others proudly refused to recite unless they were seated. Some would gesture using their hands or their whole bodies, like the poetess al-Khansa (sixth-seventh century) who, it is said, rocked and swayed, and looked

down at herself in trance.”

I wanted that trance, wanted Cassandra invoked here in poem of wailing and ejaculation, and the explication of the harm out under a cruel desert sun. For the desert will consign all to dust and sand more quickly perhaps than we can imagine. *The lone and level sands....*

Pre-Islamic: Rhythm evidently began with *saj* the root of which contains a reference to song, and is used to “denote both the musical call of the pigeon and the plaintive monotonous cry of the she-camel, alike in one respect of being continuous, unvarying sounds.”

I rather punctuated with a vast array my imagination in a verisimilitude of Etel’s time and place. And thought of her, summoned her to inhabit her rage and the rage I would enact on her behalf.

Recently I worked with Berber (Amazigh) schoolchildren in Marrakech. They had been troubled and fearful after the bombing in Jemaa el Fna in April—16 dead, 20 persons wounded—drawing pictures of their responses to the tragedy. One had to keep the poetry transmissions, which were in English and French, simple. These brilliant youngsters had grown up in a culture vivid with some of the most sophisticated music and poetry and crafts imaginable and had so much more to teach me.

We got through the first verse of “Tyger Tyger”, acting out the poem with our bodies as we chanted it together, first in French, then English, then Arabic.

Tyger Tyger burning bright—we drew a sun with our hands in the sky, over the desert perhaps, not far from the door of the Dorm we worked in.

Suddenly we were *in the forests of the night*, hands and body trembling in the darkness, yet indicating the solace of trees, our bodies growing up from the ground.

What immortal hand or eye...lifting a right hand, palm outward, and then pointing with the other hand to our left eye.

*Could frame....*we drew a large rectangle in the air.

Thy fearful symmetry...we crouched then leapt up with fierce expressions, eyes wide and wild, embodiments of this magical new generation’s tyger-energy.

The symmetry or exact correspondence of form on opposite sides of a dividing line.

Etel Adnan, *The Arab Apocalypse*, Post-Apollo Press, 1989, Sausalito, Ca.

Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, Saqi Books, London, 1990

Anne Waldman, *The Iovis Trilogy* (“Problem-Not-Solving”, “Coda: Beirut” (see letter by Etel Adnan), Coffee House Press, Minnesota. 2011

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