

Homage to Etel Adnan Nancy Peters

I was walking with my friend Rikki Ducornet late one winter night in Venice, and as we were about to cross the Academia Bridge I was astonished to hear someone call my name. It was Simone Fattal, walking toward us, with Etel Adnan, whom I had never met, although I knew her by reputation and had read and liked her powerful *Sitt Marie Rose*. We chatted briefly in this most dramatic of settings and then the two of them turned and vanished into the quiet mystery of the streets.

Although I had long admired Etel Adnan as a writer and artist, and although we both had residences in the Bay Area, our paths were not to cross again for nearly a decade, when she sent a manuscript to me at City Lights. First published in Germany, it was an extraordinary memoir, a collection of philosophical/poetic meditations that touched on many facets of identity, displacement, and war. It was a perfect book for City Lights.

In this collection of interlinked autobiographical narratives, Adnan writes, “Contrary to what is usually believed, it is not general ideas and grandiose unfolding of great events that impress the mind in times of heightened historic upheavals, but rather the uninterrupted flow of little experiences, observations, disturbances, small ecstasies or barely perceptible discouragements that make up day-to-day living.” *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country* records that uninterrupted flow. Life continues in its succession of present moments in spite of the ruination of Lebanon or the atrocity of the Iraq War: an amusing friend drops by, a favorite cat goes missing, a work of art gives pleasure. Sensitive juxtaposition of remembrance, historical analysis, and philosophical inquiry make hers a unique document – an intimate and political testament that has universal appeal. A fierce and pacific spirit, Etel is always brilliant as a moralist who shrewdly uses her art as a weapon.

Strange to say, we have met in person only a few times, so I regret that I cannot really claim her as the friend I am certain she would be. However, everywhere I go, writers and artists who know Etel tell me how she has given them crucial insights, encouraged them in their work, enkindled them. And when I have talked with Etel, I found in her always an appealing sense of humor and the rare gift of empathy. For me, she continues to be a kind of phantasm, maybe too extraordinary to be quite real: the master of so many languages and disciplines, a kind of seer bearing solemn witness as she moves through the catastrophes and amazements of the world — from Bengazi to New York, from Djbel Knissit to Mount Tamalpais, from Paris to Smyrna— living passionately and looking deeply, exercising the power of her art, of her love.

