THE BEIRUT–HELL REMIX
(AFTER ETEL ADNAN)

> But it will take decades to understand the cause of their revolt . . . . Here there is no excuse for an admixture of terms that expresses the same empty anguish, stoic hermeticism, and seriocomic strain.
> — "No Man's Land," *Bad History* (1998)‡

I

Man is going to the dogs
Straight to the cemetery
In enormous somersaults

A deux chevaux revving
M-A-O as if my depression
Were equal to my heroism

Bread and roses—the name
Of a band; flowers or flames
To be joined in revolution

Gamal Abdel Nasser dead
Living in a universe of jazz
W/ Charles Mingus on bass

Without let or hindrance
How to manage shocks as
Astonishment or headache

Night highway in California
Through dark trees against
Which is scratching a face—

Two men waiting in the wings
While taxi drivers take a piss
Upstanding on a highway—

Beirut–Damascus highway
To be exact, their itinerary
Without rest stops for glory

Without redeeming features
Mine is a picayune country
In an expanding universe

I like to see women veiled
Like my aunt used to wear
As well as those going nude

At American intersections
Where drugs may be had—
Crabs lying on their backs

Or starfish out of the sea
I like too those men who go
Cover their heads showing

Only the one eye, not those
Who are blind but the ones
Whose gaze is inner, inverted

Out of 2000 years of history
I would preserve only Jazz
Simply because it is Black—

I would banish all colors else
And desiccate the sea, where
One eats only sand at table

It is we who are the torturers
On a morning without shade
One time only this morning!

You are not yet made aware
But I am live from San Rafael
With San Quentin as my guest

A nightmare where the sun
Is drowning in its own tears
As the Bay rises at its feet—

The moon also rises above a
Four-times suicided woman's
Hair, an island uninhabited—

Angel Island and the prison
Where George Jackson lived
And Sirhan Sirhan no longer

They might be living still
But a cold nail penetrates
Their chair, not the electric—

20,000 dead Black September
20,000 nails in the king's head
20,000 heavyweight phantoms

Phantoms empty the shiny air
Their crime an absence noted
In a criminal season, Autumn

As prophetic flags wave over
The navies of the world, fire!
That a hurricane would sink

Into a cavernous abyss and
Like a roiling turbulent river
Carry away alarmed angels

To the crests of Mt. Sannine!
Get up, you dirty filthy people
Your lemonade runs to the sea

Your casinos are collapsing
Your racehorses carrying off
Their owners underground—

Where Babylon once crafted
Its poisons, the Liberation
Comes as perpetual Spring

Still under earth pushing up
It seems like its open hands
At a level low to the ground

My paternity is elemental sky
Called Uranos, my maternity
Zenobia the Palmyran Queen

But I am the original fish
Thrown up onto the strand
And determined to survive!

Imbeciles! Are you not aware
Rimbaud was among us only
A century ago, not so long—

Transiting via Beirut to Aden
Or that Fouad Gabriel Naffah
I repeat *Fouad Gabriel Naffah*

A present poet now among us
Crucified by your blankness
Burned by nitroglycerine!

Go ahead, people of Beirut
As you snore in your sleep
Let the nitroglycerine burn

Those pine woods at whose
Feet you deposit your trash
Your toilet paper your cans

The entire country is trashed
A dump site of foreign trade
Not saleable anywhere else—

This land of ever fecundating
Tammuz now become an open
Wound for flies to live off of—

Degenerate offspring satisfied
To have their shoes shined by
Crowds of penniless beggars—

Your dumbstruck expression
A mask borrowing its likeness
From such as pigs and cows—

II

Three times over the centuries
Earthquakes destroyed Beirut
Now a fourth is on its way—

As a new world being born
As the people arrive with it
As people are coming soon—

The eagle sends a message
To the tribe; the camel and
The shark send a message—

A message clear to anyone
Who hears: all over the world
We arrive, revolution coming!

In New York I say *d* . . . . to
America; in Moscow *d* . . . . to
Stalin; in Rabat *f* . . . Hassan

Long live the city of beggars
The spontaneous self-sacrifice
Of visionary Mohammads

Long live all prisoners too—
Nights when the murky dark
Moves I stand guard over all

Prostitutes, as it is forbidden
For women to think; all maids
As we are forbidden to sleep

All brides who go to bed alone
As it is forbidden for women
To range wide like gazelles—

Over the far Arabian steppes
Over the wide range of desert
Over the face of the desert or

Streets of our bitch-in-heat
Cities—there are nothing but
Miscreants, cripples, maimed

By a chain of governments
Without end, whose crimes
Bark louder than hyenas—

Crying *Babylon* in name only
City of origin and dispersal
I cry your rebirth and death

From the Hanging Gardens to
Camp Alpha helipad, a people
Dispersed across the earth who

Do not understand each other
As we move from Resistance
To psychic Mastery and then

To Prophecy, of the Divine
Whose real name is *people-who-suffer*, everywhere displaced—

Comrade Dostoyevski is here
In Beirut, Orient-Prince Hotel
And dining at the Horse-Shoe

Which collapsed, killing two
He bathes at St. George's spa
And yawns—you go figure—

At AUB, where as contrition
He counts typographic errors
In the daily journal *An-Nagar*

Comrade Dostoyevski, he says
Loves only the Qur'an القرآن
And knows only compassion

Even so comrade Dostoyevski
Was arrested by the DGSG—
The Lebanese Security Police

Who monitor social media to
This day—at which he laughs
And laughs, and his laughter

Broadcast to the entire world
May be caught on Channel 14,
PBS in California, as I found

Yes I would like to break open
The sky, trigger lightning and
Bring on a flood to this town

Because our quiet desperation
Is prostituting even the plants
The pain on a vulture's face

When a boat refuses to leave
Someone has missed the boat
And sycophants are miffed—

In the middle of History
At the heart of the hexagon
At the crux of the whole thing

Gamal Abdel Nasser lives
And dies, and from his grave
Issues forth the first miracle—

I meant to tell you about our
Saints we call them *Marabout*
Or scholars of Qur'an القرآن

Some nude women lying next
To our dead, Sitt Marie Rose
Or woman as a sacred text—

It is on hills of Amman where
You must seek redemption and
In the camp Wehdat, Spring

And over the bones of Abou
Slimane, unknown, you will
Write verses of Qur'an القرآن

III

Unreal city! More than that—
As the wind rising pregnant
With the sins of the world

It is in your body foreigners
Ply their traitorous alchemy
Giving birth to expectations

Of the October wind I love—
Reddish skies predicting war
To come from where I write

Sodium vapor lamps lighting
The fishermen and their boats
The Bay outlasting any light

Rue Hamra: if it could talk
Neural networks would fray
And our skin tones blanch

Spectators becoming spectres
And money exuding a stink—
Now ready for reinvestment

Where formerly I would fall
On my knees for the children
Who were sold for the pleasure

Of a night, or of an afternoon
Or later four in the morning
Sadism was cheap in Beirut

City! What crimes in your bars
What alcohol in the bathtubs
Of more respectable homes

What fiduciary gains in the
Muezzin's cry! Illustrious city
Now more famous than hell,

Denizen of all passageways
Queen of all trade! Precious
Object of our nocturnal love—

You have intoxicated us with
Your inaccessible purity only
To provoke the storm to come

Now the trumpet is sounded
Jazz has arrived it is the hour
Of delirium, when time stops

The hour and our destiny is
Made clear, we are unclothed
Gilgamesh and his secret herb

Citizens of Beirut! Covered
In figures and surfeited with
Greasy food, dumbed down

With malignant thoughts—
Do you have any memory of
The night of September 18th?

A motorized angel crosses the
Sky over the liberated zone—
You must break all mirrors!

Turn your direction toward
Mt. Sannine! Look at the sun
When it is rising, as if new!

Draw your swords and tear
The Arab world apart so that
Only Liberty bursts through!

Here I make a spontaneous
Funeral oration pronounced
Over our material remains

Not sulfur or manganese but
Potassium chloride in the wells
And quicklime on the houses

Thus to treasonous painters:
Go plunge into steaming vats
Of acid. To treasonous poets:

You speak of roses in a city
But it is a garden of asphalt
To treasonous governments:

Your umbilical cords are only
The telephone lines connecting
Washington to Vladivostok

To treasonous priests: you play
Hide and seek with money in
Your schools while consciences

Are left exposed for vermin
Let liberation liberate you!
And to the city—at the foot

Of the mountain at sunrise
Each one of us has become a
Legend, is becoming and will!

One homeless person of two
Is covered in lice, the velvet
Of his tender skin a living fur

While young persons stream
Out of the Imperial Cinema
With puffy lips enflamed—

Of masturbation in the dark
Atavistic hunger in the belly
And the perfume of celluloid

Taking the place of woman
A vast desert of love walling
Them into graves ready made

They only love their mothers
Yet I know streets where police
Will rape anything on two legs

As privileged sons drive past
The scene in souped-up cars
Glassy-eyed stone cold looks

Here I would also announce
The fabulous acceleration of
Planets and the dynamics of

Catastrophe: sons of Canaan
And the entire Levant, you are
About to die for the last time!

IV

Take a train my friend, a train
To Amman—"the only place on
Earth to offer us an occult life"

As Antonin Artaud had said—
"And that on the surface of life"
Our fate is suchwise Aboriginal

As petrochemical hordes come
To destroy the very structures
They raised, chimneys pouring

Toxicity into pounding skies–
Of mornings without memory
I foresee a tidal wave to come

Dried-up wells, ant mounds
Plagues of the South eroding
The sad soil of the Ancestor—

As we perspire in midday heat
An icy sweat, we watch furtive
Thieves work the promenade

A fool of an astronaut wears
A wig he believes is his helmet
Our domestics' skin is burning

On account of nitroglycerine
Pouches in the frontal lobes of
Their lovers set to explode in

Crazed laughter of the enemy
Beirut—*magicienne de la terre*
Brings the world its ill omen

But what to make of innocence
If not to parade it as a tumor
On the face of its *bad history*—

A strange clarity on this night
In California with its highways
And beaches its darkened trees

Against which Ahmad-the-
Violent, Khalid-the-Dissolute
Stroke their cocks out of fear

Fear of what they are afraid of
The Express that whisks away
Their doubles at full speed—

Allure of death in dry ravines
Of a city burned by phosphor
Supplied by the Americans—

It has been a million years or
So since the Hashemites quit
Mecca in the belly of a beast

The original Dinosaur ending
With this massacre it has been
A million years as well since

Amman-the-Hideous has been
Condemned on the throne of
The petroline Apocalypse—

I strolled for quite a while on
The Corniche over the ocean
With Al-Ghazali as companion

And pinched a bit of olive oil
From the Orthodox church to
Beatify him Prince of the City

Comrade Al-Ghazali is staying
At the Hotel Metropole where
In demotic Greek he takes me

To lunch at Barmaki, chatting
Up his friends in the Lebanese
Theater at Wimpy's snack-bar

Fast forward to a decade later
Receiving his mail courtesy of
Interpol or an itinerant whale

The ritornello of a flute plays
In the popular alleys to allay
The nastiness of the citizens

As the ancient god Shamash
Has returned—in Irbid, Zarka
Ur and Basra the sun returns

The dead returning to fight
Because the living are cowards
Citizens of Beirut in bikinis

And lingerie covered in feathers
If need be on the first Express
Line up to take the Express—

Take their vertebrae in hand
And squeeze out colonialism
Like a pus for consolation—

So that there can be air water
Earth and fire the elemental
Conditions of our true being

Take the Beirut–Hell Express
Take the Express though it is
More than late so that there

Can be air water earth and fire
The train whistles stamps spits
It is the Beirut–Hell Express

E.A., original 1970
B.W., adaptation 2022

NOTE

In composing this tribute to the life and work of Etel Adnan, I wanted to write a poem that would sample, translate, and elaborate on one or more of her original texts. Drawn to the recently published "L'Express Beyrouth–Enfer," in the handsome edition from Galerie Lelong (2021) that places it at the beginning of a series of invocatory odes addressing Beirut and liberation from the 1970s on, I thought such a contribution would channel and foreground the diasporic history and experience that Adnan's multifaceted work arises from. I began by sampling and recasting into an altogether different stanzaic and metrical form the core tropes and narratives of the original, working from the original French and aided by online dictionaries and, at times, Adnan's English version.

I was following the practice of sampling original texts to create critical rereadings, as I have done with works by Leo Tolstoy, Kenneth Fearing, William Carlos Williams and later Paul Celan, Stanisław Lem, and Jean Cocteau—into a form I call "correlations." In this case, as with Celan and Cocteau, I was encountering a foreign language in an act of translation, both literary and cultural—language as other. But I now realize I was also following a more recent tradition of "reading through" in poetry and the "remix" in electronic music—readings through original texts by John Cage and Jackson Mac Low, and remixings of musical sources into entirely different sonic and rhythmic patterns. The works of Cage, Steve Reich, and Terry Riley have been treated to this process, where it meets the practice of nonstop remixing in electronic genres like techno.

What resulted samples the source text, the open form and rhetoric of Adnan's original, and recasts it through the constraint of measured three-line stanzas, resulting in an entirely different rhythmic basis that both intensifies and interprets the original meaning. This process of recasting in a visually and metrically different form is in no sense a faithful translation of the original, but neither is it a transgression or abridgment. I think what results is a critical act of rereading forced by the choices the new form, the new rhythm and act of condensation, enforces and suggests. It is a transposition of Etel Adnan's original poem on a different formal basis, but also at a different time and place that must equally be taken into account. The result must inevitably be a new work.

Etel Adnan wrote her poem at the "zero hour" of the outset of the liberationist '70s; it records a moment of historical and cultural and, I am sure, personal turmoil under the "welter of events." The poem is itself situated in Beirut, at a

remove from the political violence then occurring in Amman, Jordan, while anticipating the Lebanese Civil War by half a decade. At the same time, the poem was written in California, in French, combining Adnan's experiences in Beirut with her location on the West Coast, brought into the poem with its mention of the imprisonment of George Jackson and Sirhan Sirhan in San Quentin but also the shared Mediterranean climate and landscape. The "zero hour" of the poem is thus the crisis of Beirut (and Lebanon) but also the displacement of diaspora, the remove from which Adnan can only be, in the overused term, a "witness." Here being a witness does not confer immediate moral authority but adds to the tragedy of being unable to act in any way but in the form of the poem. The poem is, in Charles Olson's terms, a "stopping of the battle" even as it continues it, but it is also a battle witnessed from afar. It is also important to note the extent that the strife in the poem is inherently sexual, a double register both liberatory and repressed.

Adnan's historicism, in this work and many others—the poems "Jebu" and *The Arab Apocalypse*, the novel *Sitt Marie Rose*, the memoire *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country*—strongly contrasts with the present immediacy of her lyric writings and visual art. What joins the two is indeed one register of Adnan's importance as a global writer and thinker, and is not easily reduced to common terms. Heidegger's "historicity of being," important for Adnan's intensification of the present as disclosure, does not square with the historicism of cultures in conflict that produced the series of evental ruptures which punctuate our global temporality, from the Vietnam War to Iraq and Afghanistan. Where the cosmopolitan calm and immanent language of her lyric work and visual art are often cast as the bottom line on her contribution, the global historicism of these works must be taken into account as part of their presentness.

The core of these "poems including history" in Adnan's work, from "Jebu" to *The Arab Apocalypse*, are what might be termed "epic odes." A series of prior examples cannot be missed—the negative spaces of both T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," as well as surrealist imagery after Lautréamont and Breton, punctuate the poem. But it is the relentless sequence of one negative moment to the next, the envisionment of historical devolution, that is most remarkable in the Beirut series. It is my hope that my adaptation draws clearly into view the inexorable and downward logic of these negative tropes, violent figures that often depart from the sobriety of witnessing to a high pitch of sarcasm—to the extent that the poem is an ideological attack on whatever semblance of normality the "citizens of Beirut" would cling to. In that

sense, the poem has continued to be prophetic, and I am told that up until her death Adnan's persistent, nearly obsessional concern was with events in Beirut.

In presenting this poem as a tribute to Etel Adnan, I hope to add to the perspectives that may be brought to her work. Mine is informed by a series of poems "including history" as a sequence of negative events, as I have just described in Adnan's poetry. This sequence includes titles such as *Progress, Under Erasure,* and *Bad History*, and a long poem I shared with Adnan on the refusal of normalization in the Trump Era, "Plan B." In this cluster of poems "including history," I do see the emergence of what may be called a "global archive" of the period in which we live. But I also see a distinct envisionment of life as we know it as "world," joining history and present, as an exemplary contribution of Etel Adnan. We are only beginning to discern the meanings of such a "world," and her works in multiple media, literary and visual, lead the way.

—Barrett Watten
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About Barrett Watten

Barrett Watten is a language-centered poet and critic, the author of numerous volumes of poetry including *Frame (1971–1990)*, *Bad History*, *Progress/Under Erasure*, and the recently completed *Zone (Correlations, 1973–2021)*. With nine other poets, he collaborated on the ten volumes of *The Grand Piano: An Experiment in Collective Autobiography, San Francisco, 1975–1980*. His work in poetics includes *Total Syntax*, *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics*, and *Questions of Poetics: Language Writing and Consequences*. With Carrie Noland, he co-edited *Diasporic Avant-Gardes*; and with Lyn Hejinian, he is co-editor of *A Guide to Poetics Journal: Writing in the Expanded Field, 1982–1998* and *Poetics Journal Digital Archive*. He teaches at Wayne State University in Detroit, where he is a member of its Academy of Scholars. His website is barrettwatten.net; a video of his reading of "The Annotated 'Plan B'" is available online at *Philosopher au present*: bit.ly/3fkBy8W.

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‡ Bibliographic note: "The Beirut–Hell Remix" is an adaptation of the original work by Etel Adnan, originally written in French, "L'Express Beirut–Enfer," in *L'Express Beirut–Enfer et autres poèmes* (Paris: Galerie Lelong, 2021). It was first published in the Beirut journal *L'Orient* in 1971, followed by a chapbook in 1973 (Paris: J.P. Oswald). Her English version, "The Beirut–Hell Express," is included in *to look at the sea is to become what one is: An Etel Adnan Reader*, ed. Thom Donovan and Brandon Shimoda (Brooklyn and Callicoon, N.Y.: Nightboat Books, 2014), 1:73–86. The epigraph is taken from *Bad History* by Barrett Watten (Berkeley: Atelos Press, 1998). Thanks to Simone Fattal and the Estate of Etel Adnan.