

**University of Sydney**

**Nour Dados**

**Lament on a postcard**

Bibliographical note:

Nour Dados was born in Beirut and spent a considerable part of her formative years living in cars, bomb shelters and relatives' houses before migrating to Australia with her family. She is currently Senior Research Associate in the Department of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney. Her research focuses on historical geographies of embodiment and material culture and intersections of space and power.



Fig. 1. From F Debbas, *Beirut our memory: a guided tour*, 1986, 19

## I. Writing in waves

Beirut: the explosion of my anxieties in foam. A remote sea wed to an ochre ocean; or untranslated salt, breaking against the rocks.

Beirut, my phantom on horseback, only in dreams do I smell you, only there do I count your stars to the nearest one hundred, and only there do I hear Pessoa telling me to destroy the idea of bridges. The strangeness in which you clothe the landscapes of all countries punctuates the rhythm of my hours, and forcibly straightens the curves of my horizon which are always less than bridges between us. Pessoa arrives in waves that land on your sleepy shore. It is one of me who inhabits those that never reach you. With the tide I carry you on my back, a blank card that falls out of a book. Which book? I do not know.

Beirut, mine is the task of writing to you from the other side of a mirror, of sending you postcards in waves. Waves, that eat my words, not out of hunger or boredom, but because in the deluge, reading is a palpable sensation. In the deluge, words curl their feet like breakers before they crash against the shore. There, they swell into sentences and migrate into stories that never stand as tall as phrases.

In Beirut, the traces of the ocean cling together and erupt into words that are always less than sentences. The voice a Portuguese sailor sings Pessoa's 'Maritime Ode' much further south: 'My anxieties explode in foam/And my flesh is a wave about to break against the rocks!' (1986: 56). Pessoa joins in, drunk on the salt of a common sea flooding an indifferent ocean in the 'Absurd Hour': 'One must destroy the idea of all bridges,/Clothe in strangeness the landscapes of all countries,/Forcibly straighten the curve of horizons.' (1986: 153). Is it curiosity and adventure, or a sense of permanent exile that crushes compasses and bathes the present in distance?

## II. Watermarks

Vision: I once received a postcard that bore visible traces of having been submerged in water, of having had its bones pickled in brine. It had not reached me by the usual air-route, but by keeping to the paths of fish now dodging saline letters. It had been read so many times by the water that it no longer belonged to the world of light. Nothing of its journey remained but a residual saltiness that the eye could only reconstitute as silence.

## III. Lost Routes

Travel: a postcard from elsewhere arrives at my door, a place I have never visited. Somewhere between the picture and the writing on the back, I become the cartographer who is always leaving without having left. Impossible journeys charted onto invisible maps.

A breeze I did not encounter: when my grandfather returned to Lebanon from Genoa in 1956, he brought his incommensurable elsewhere with him. Now a tattered book with yellow pages, his *Ricordo di Genova* survives as a coincidence, more my curiosity than his. Despite its hardcover and book-like appearance, the *Ricordo di Genova* is not really a book but a catalogue of postcards posing as photos of the city. Here, and here and here, I tell him, you *forgot* to write anything. Not a single word on the backs of any of the photographer's striking images – portraits and panoramas, piazzas, roads and monuments, among them, the *Monumento a Cristoforo Colombo*, Genoa's native son. The imposing facades of concrete, all named for men who have claimed, planned and built cities, are offset with Genoa's winding sea roads. No trace of the quarantine zone at the port where my grandfather was housed when he arrived on a ship called the *Corriente*. Instead, a motionless sepia ocean weaves a shadow under my eyes, under all the eyes of the readers of all the postcards. The strings that hold together the book's spine have grown tired of standing straight and slowly send out little cotton missives that land on the surface of paper, no paper, empty paper, no letters.

## IV. Elsewheres

Waves: the original postcard. Broken pieces of sentences, always less than phrases. Letters, words, blocks of wood, fractured elsewheres recast as handpicked desires, rhythms dense and disorganised, saltiness reconstituted as silence, discarded dreams in search of dreamers, a desert of origins and abandoned watchtowers swinging gently to the chesty anthems of all the world's oceans. Paths crossed by salty messages penned in a storm. While I was *away from here*, I sent you this postcard – all that remains, what still remains, of an encounter with an elsewhere that arrived at my door and entered without knocking. In the saltiness only distance remains.

## V. Postcards

Dreams: old parchment inside new thoughts. In dreams, it is always the dust of another city that settles on the heels of distance and longing. The city dances in vain, it never overcomes the glistening arteries of all the world's postcards. Here, and there, it dwells in the sadness of unsent letters cluttering the stratosphere of ordinary homes.

Alone, and surviving on what he could, my grandfather made his way around the Middle East, Europe and South America. He was sailing from Rio de Janeiro to Beirut when an earthquake struck and forced his ship to dock temporarily. He says they stayed in the quarantine area for eight days. When he returned to Lebanon, he brought Genoa with him. My mother, the eldest in the family, was barely four years old. Yet somehow, his postcards survived the destruction of my grandparents' house in Agrippa Street, their hurried escape, a voyage to Cyprus by boat, and another to Australia, to end up with my mother who left Lebanon six years later. They reveal nothing of war and exile but a threadbare cover and discoloured pages, signs of age that could befall any object, however treasured. They offer only their reticent landscapes, and the possibility that there was once a place called Genoa that looked something like them.

## VI. Distance

Irene: the city in the distance. Under the watchful gaze of Italo Calvino, Marco Polo becomes an architect of *invisible cities*. Irene 'is the city visible when you lean out from the edge of the plateau at the hour when the lights come on, and in the limpid air, the pink of the settlement can be discerned spread out in the distance below ...' (Calvino 1997: 124).

Darkness is minutes away and the lights from the city rattle in an electric fog. The high-rises that occupy the city's distance emboss their cacophonous likeness onto shadows. Glowing embers spark and fly over darkened towers. Irene, Polo wants us to understand, is not a city proper but an aspect of cities. He is unable to describe the city beyond how it appears from afar: 'if you saw it, standing in its midst, it would be a different city; Irene is a name for a city in the distance, and as you approach, it changes' (Calvino 1997: 124-125).

From afar I can only just make out a glowing neon sign on the walls of one of its buildings. It is superfluous, just the name of a company, a company that might exist in any city on the planet. Slowly its letters dissolve into the sea's salty skin and leave little ripples that look like goose bumps.

## VII. Balconies

Homecoming: standing on a balcony in Beirut's Hamra district, the city's commercial centre, I survey what I can of Beirut's sea from above. This sea of traffic does not resemble the sea of my postcards. I take photos on my mobile phone as the cars labour their way home. It is almost as though I am practising to take a photograph.

Car exhaust fumes suffocate the early morning and late afternoon, but I never close my balcony. The smell works its way into my memories. My childhood is falsified into a single anchor in an ocean of noise. The smell of traffic is now the signpost to my past. Who knows what other memories will be created in this conjuncture.

Instead of breathing in the sea that my parents talked about, iodine and salt, I adjust to the pollution and I remember that it is only this smell that I really know. The sea that is so close, only a few kilometres away, is always invisible once I reach the city. It is too far away for me to care now that I am here. It is much further away here than it was before I arrived. The sea of my postcards is only good for shipwrecks. It matters little to me now, here, in the middle of a traffic jam.

## VIII. Panorama

Postcards: the leftovers of vision in a sieve held by a stranger. A panoramic photograph of a city, which may or may not be a postcard, is a means of grasping at what cannot be seen. If panorama is a form of hyper-visibility that is forever inventing new techniques of vision, the postcard is its forgotten second cousin, offering only silhouettes punctuated by shadows.

In *Paris, when it's naked* Etel Adnan remarks on 'the blessings of fog! ...the only time when people admit that they can see nothing' (1993a). Fog is the skin of things, a postcard for the everyday. In Paris, Adnan writes, 'cities attract each other like flowers do, they form a secret society and you can't get involved with one of them without being solicited by the others' (1993: 98). She lives, this Lebanese writer-poet, between Paris, Beirut and California. 'I'm walking simultaneously on many tracks,' she says, 'standing on Aleppo's Citadel I'm also standing by this red light, getting wet, and I'm walking the streets of Beirut where a snow storm is raging' (Adnan 1993a: 98). I lose her in the traffic, her whose feet have known the contours of so many continents, who feels the raging snow storm in the softness of rainfall and sees the walled cities of Syria in the flash of a red traffic light. She crosses oceans like roads, hunting a distance that never pauses long enough to reveal itself.

## IX. The Impossibility of seeing the sea

Cities: When Etel Adnan returns to her balcony in Beirut, she inhabits it in a way I never do. Adnan writes letters, not postcards. Hers is a world with paths from Paris to Aleppo, mine is a world of images. There, in Beirut where I watched the traffic, I could not see Adnan's sea. I was too far away.

'There is no use living in Paris,' Adnan writes, 'when all one cares for is the sea. Still, this is what thousands of people do, and what I do, too' (1993: 57). How could one bear this separation where it not that, 'the ocean penetrates Paris in subversive ways, mostly through the treachery of fish markets: some salt, some iodine, and you have the Atlantic in your nostrils' (Adnan 1993: 75-76).

Without travelling, without having set sail, the middle of the ocean arrives in the city. A tall history of shadows strangles this indifferent spouse of the salty Mediterranean. Here, like there, the uneven movement of human cargo through the centuries has left a film of broken landscapes over the water. It gathers momentum at every port of call, choking the tide as it tries in vain to complete the registry of those who drowned. History is a coffin sailing in every direction.

## X. Cities

Sea: the uninterrupted expectation of arrivals and departures. In *The Seducer* René Magritte gives us the ship as the extension of the sea. The ocean takes the form of a ship with sails. No horizon, only the monotony of waves and a long voyage. Sailing has become a metaphor *par excellence*. But what exactly is to be extracted from the simple outline of ships?

In Paris, the absent sea allows Adnan's writing to occupy the distance of postcards. That sea hovers like an enduring vision that is constantly singing its impossibility. The sea that arrives in the middle of Paris withers away when Adnan closes in on it in Beirut. In Beirut, distance evaporates, the sea changes: 'then, the sea beyond my windows isn't an ally anymore. She resembles the sun too much and burns my eyes' (Adnan 1993b: 111). This vision of the sea is from a collection of letters titled *Of Cities and Women*. Written between 1990 and 1992 from Barcelona, Skopelos, Murcia, Berlin, Rome and Beirut, Lebanon's post-war despair is captured in Adnan's final letter from its capital where, '...everything is gone save the climate. And something of the sea has left, too, because the sea is so messy. She's so polluted that swimming is impossible and one has to wait for the night or the evening to look at her with some kind of innocence' (1993b: 111-112). Her letter from Beirut, the final letter in the collection, ends with the return of the sea as ally. She writes: 'the sea is in movement. Things speak out. Everything is language' (1993b: 113).

## XI. Beirut

Sailing: A barefoot sailor makes paper boats that float in the kitchen sink. This one will grow into a woman who will also learn how to bake, build and swim in the ocean. If Beirut is a balcony it will never reach the deep blue sea that forgot to write the names of those who drowned. No postcards, only wounds that mask the ground.

I am acutely aware of my immobility – my reluctance to take up sea-faring and a sailor's life. I look, and see '*those pearls that were his eyes*'. Stretched out in the

middle of the ocean, I have entered the image from which there is no exit. Fear of death by water everywhere.

You cannot always sail into the arms of the ocean's many metaphors. Nor can you recline in Gaston Bachelard's ocean-city where the bed becomes a boat and the room a sea (Bachelard 1998: 28). Here, as elsewhere, the ship, that unique piece of engineering that underpins generations of dreams of discovery, is born from the belly of the sea. In Michel Foucault's words, the ship is not only 'a floating piece of space' and 'a place without a place', but 'the greatest reserve of the imagination' (1984: 27). 'In civilisations without boats,' muses Foucault, 'dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure and the police take the place of pirates' (1984: 27). But the present marks all our metaphors as lies.

There, in Beirut, is only darkness, and an eclipse of place. No, it is not quite innocent this borrowing of voices, it is only the distance that hides it in the tumble and roll. Will anyone recall that Adonis, the Syrian poet who now lives in Paris, had written during the siege of Beirut in 1982, 'Darkness/The Earth's trees have become tears on heaven's cheeks./An eclipse in this place./Death snapped the city's branch and the friend's departed'? (1982: 147).

## **XII. SY 'Argonaut'**

Shipwrecks: wine from the last port of call singing to the music of an interior desert. Clouds with flushed cheeks that cannot find mirrors to check their reflections. The present flounders, spilling its victims into the salty foam of the distant port. Ocean or tropical island? Or vision without bearings, without a location from which to postmark our correspondences?

The expectation of arrivals and departures make us ignorant of sea-sickness, of desperation, of bodies washing up on the northern tip of an eastern sea that bleeds into the Atlantic. There, in the Mediterranean, waves do not crash, they roll. Their breaths short and hushed never reach the ocean beneath the Southern Cross.

I can see it in a postcard of the 'SY Argonaut', a ship that docked in Beirut in March 1902. The steamer, set above a motionless sea, appears like a dream in black and white. The image is contained in a fuzzy oval on a white background. It is like so many others from that era: misty ships, ports, oceans and wharves. Others too are inscribed with short personal messages. This one reads: 'March 1902. Crossing the ocean to wish you all good wishes for the 6<sup>th</sup> – Beirut (Syrie)' (Debbas 1986).

Far from that hazy Mediterranean, those words pierce the tip of a boat floating in a sink, and fall slowly into the water. Postcards flounder if they are too heavy, but they never become letters. Here there are no waves to carry you home.

## **Works cited**

Adnan, E 1993a *Paris, when it's naked*, Sausalito, California: Post-Apollo Press

- Adnan, E 1993b *Of cities & women (Letters to Fawwaz)*, Sausalito, California: Post-Apollo Press
- Adonis, Darwish M & Al-Qassim S 1984 *Victims of a map*, trans A Al-Udhari, London: Saqi
- Bachelard, G 1994 *The poetics of space*, trans M Jolas, Boston: Beacon Press
- Calvino, I 1997 *Invisible cities*, trans W Weaver, London: Vintage
- Debbas, F 1986 *Beirut our memory: a guided tour illustrated from the collection of Fouad Debbas*, Beirut: Naufal Group/Cesar Debbas & Fils
- Eliot, T S 1981 *The waste land and other poems*, London: Faber and Faber
- Foucault, M 1986 'Of other spaces', *Diacritics* 16: 1, 22-27
- Honig, E & Brown, S M (eds) 1998 *Poems of Fernando Pessoa*, San Francisco: City Lights Books