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A love letter to Beirut

How do you write about home from a place of fear, grief and disbelief?

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Wonder Beirut, Postcards of War, 1997-2006 © Courtesy of the artist and The Third Line, Dubai

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I was once in an English composition class where someone wrote a story about a woman whose husband beat her with a dress belt, raped her and eventually ran off with all her assets, but not before the woman was diagnosed with cancer, of the kind that beautiful teenage girls get in movies — Stage Four and not too hard to pronounce.

"I see what you were trying to do," the teacher said as she handed back the sheaf of papers branded with blue scribbles, "but the story just didn't feel believable." An early snow fogged the classroom windows, blurring Boston's red row-houses beyond. It was fall 2019, my third semester, and as winter approached, I spent most of my time watching the hopeful images of marching crowds in Lebanon on my phone, scenes of what people back home were calling the *thawra*, or revolution.

My classmate, a fidgety American who was always wedging her fingers through the tight weave of her knitted cardigan, protested mildly. She had pulled the story

almost directly from true events. The woman's fate had made local news in her hometown.

But our teacher argued that this was beside the point. It was fiction, she said, so it was important for the worlds we were building to feel real. What were the odds that every imaginable cruelty would be dumped on a single character in such a short span of time? My classmate nodded reluctantly. "True or not," the teacher added, "it threatens our suspension of disbelief. You risk losing the reader."

I remember thinking that day how soothing it would be if the real world had an author like the one our teacher wanted us to be. Someone serious who, if not beneath the occasional cruelty to spice things up, nevertheless operated within certain bounds of scale, preoccupied with such tasteful concerns as "not losing the reader".

When hundreds of tonnes of ammonium nitrate exploded at the Port of Beirut in August 2020, devastating large parts of the city, I watched the footage over and over again from Paris, where I was living. "I can't believe it," everyone around me kept saying. "It looks like something out of a Hollywood movie." The blast seemed, in some strange sense, implausible and exaggerated — poorly written, in its demand that we believe in the possibility of such a sudden and overwhelming act of violence. In a decent work of fiction, it would have been cut in the edit.

Today, as Israel continues its ground invasion of Lebanon, I am returned once more to this feeling, beyond fear and grief, of incredulity. Can it be real? I wonder, as I watch more corpses being pulled from the rubble on my phone, while riding the metro to work. My body is here in Paris while my mind, as it has been all year, is there.

For something to feel real, my writing teacher said, you must anchor it with vivid detail. Is it the lack of faces, names or bright yellow rain boots colouring the death toll that makes it hard for people to perceive that, before these buildings were reduced to rubble, they were real buildings where there lived real civilians? I look at the grey expanses of dust and see a missing world. A world that, to me, has always been as real as its continual obliteration is difficult to believe.

In the four years since the August 4 blast, I have tried and failed to write about Lebanon many times. It was as if the explosion had gutted not just the

country's capital but all the story arcs I might have imagined for it. I wanted to capture the crude, quiet certainty I'd always had, growing up in Paris as the daughter of Lebanese parents who fled in 1989, at the end of the civil war, that the turmoil back home was only temporary, the true country lying dormant. Above all, I wanted to capture the sudden arrest of this hope on that day at 6.08pm, when the largest non-nuclear blast in history froze the capital's clocks.

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But I struggled to find my tone. Sometimes I ambled mournfully in a poetic land of cedars and thyme, ancient olive trees with knotty grey trunks opened out by time, only to be yanked out by the honk of another car while waiting in line for benzine. At other times I donned a historical, dispassionate voice, but found myself endlessly annotating and qualifying my neat summaries in this country where, like a Hydra, each story seems to grow two more plot lines when you try to trim it. "The investigation was quashed by political interference," I wrote, along with words like justice, reparations, inalienable and disfigured. But they felt like words alone, distinct from the apocalyptic screams looping on our screens, the mushroom clouds and glass in people's eyes.

The rest of the crisis similarly resisted my attempts at description. The phrase "triple-digit inflation" lodged itself in my mouth and my notebook, but it missed the toxic fumes, the shuffling of meaningless bills, the Syrian refugee children

dying in their sleep because their mothers had tried burning coal for heat.

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I tried other styles: devotional, polemical, elegiac. I adopted a sarcastic voice when I sat down to write shortly after landing at the airport in Beirut, where a billboard of a woman in a bathing suit welcomes you with that ubiquitous pledge — we still have hot women — before you drive away on Imam Khomeini Avenue. I wrote when I felt dazed and depressed flying back out, staring down from the plane window at that familiar coastline, always coming in or out of view, never quite keeping still.

No pitch was right, no framing captured the whole. The act of writing itself felt futile. When I sought endings for the dozens of beginnings I'd jettisoned, I managed only the same narrative side steps that I had opened with, like the condemned man in George Orwell's essay "A Hanging" who, walking towards the gallows, swerves to avoid a puddle. Ultimately, I realised I could not write any story about Lebanon because the ending I longed for was out of reach, doomed to remain a fiction.

I was not alone in this strange verbal paralysis. Something new was happening with language, with our ability to describe what was happening to our country. Even words seemed to be breaking faith with their meanings, mutating into metonyms for the problems associated with them: "kahraba" (electricity) now meant the power was out, "benzine" (gas) that there were gas shortages, "mazout" (fuel) that fuel was unaffordable. Sheer exhaustion, making sentences obsolete.

A certain fatigued silence, like a rhetorical shrug, set in as the *thawra* protests petered out. By then, we had little patience with the ways we had previously characterised Lebanon, the leitmotifs with which we had composed our country, hoping to make sense of a century of chaos. Lebanon, country of hospitality, of resilience, of dark humour. A boat that may never reach the shore, but will never sink. We were no longer comforted by the idea of a country of contrasts or a paradise lost, the sunny conversational preludes ("skiing in the morning and sunbathing in the afternoon!") or the palliative, halfhearted codas ("it's a love-hate relationship").

relationship").

My father sometimes said that Lebanon was like a sick child whom we had a duty to protect. My mother described it more like an abusive fatherland that we had a duty to protect ourselves from. I could not disagree with either of them.

A few days ago, I asked my parents whether they believed that Lebanon would survive this latest assault. "Everything is possible, habibti," they replied absently, eyes glued to the TV it seems they have been watching ever since their plane touched down in Paris 35 years ago. But it was the same phrase they'd used when I'd asked them about the Beirut blast in 2020, how 2,750 tonnes of ammonium nitrate could have ended up in the port. It only made me think of life in Lebanon before I was born, of my parents' childhoods spent in underground shelters. Everything is indeed possible for children of the Middle East: to be orphaned overnight, to be burnt alive, for school to be carpet-bombed, for the war never to end.

In the adjoining room, my little sister was listening to Fairuz's "Li Beirut", that wartime lament that was played everywhere after the 2020 explosion, at once love letter and requiem for the city. "To its rock shaped like an old sailor's face . . . She was wine from the spirit of the people . . . Bread and jasmine, from their sweat . . . "

The scenes of terror on the TV melded with Fairuz's high flute, in A minor. Then she reached for golden F major, a ray of sun piercing through the music, but she was pulled back down, as always, into the minor key, to a "taste of fire and smoke". "Beirut has extinguished its lantern," Fairuz sung. "She has become alone in the night."

According to the latest figures, more than a million people have been displaced in Lebanon. I am trying to write about the country again, and I am struggling. The only things I have managed to set down all year are depressingly convoluted analogies aimed at securing western empathy; and my own name, more times than I can count, on scrolls of protest for all those dead Palestinian Youmnas on the other side of the world.

This deadlock likely has a plainer explanation than any I learnt in school. It's the simple precept that underpins both Israel's impunity in its mass slaughter of civilian populations and Hizbollah's decision to turn Lebanon into a pellet for Iran's regional agenda: that Arab life is, ultimately, disposable. It is never the

central story. It is rarely the story at all. It is a statistic within the story, or at the story's vanishing edge.

When I read this morning, as a footnote to the broader geopolitical drama, that the death toll in Lebanon had surpassed 2,500 people, I thought again about my English composition class, the way my teacher had warned us about preserving our readers' fragile suspension of disbelief. She had listed a few common hazards: anachronism, cliché, melodrama and, worst of all, deus ex machina. This, she explained, was where a contrived new force swooped in at the last moment to save a hopeless situation.

How light, how easy, those words had sounded in my teacher's voice, in the warmth of our classroom under the steady buzzing of the overhead lights. But I am not sure that she got the relationship between horror and disbelief quite right. The Lebanon of my imagination, for one, always feels most vivid when the real Lebanon is being bombed and bloodied beyond comprehension. As for the idea that a writer who depicts unimaginable horrors risks losing her readers, it seems not to have reached the Lebanese diaspora, whose country is never further from losing its readership than when we are watching its black smoke on our screens from the strange new homes in Paris, Dubai, Rio or New York where its painful history has pushed us.

Even now, I know, we are trying to lift our homeland up into an ending, to carry golden F major all the way to the coda — even if another flattening has already suspended our story in time, asserting a world in which all we can hope for is something like a deus ex machina.

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