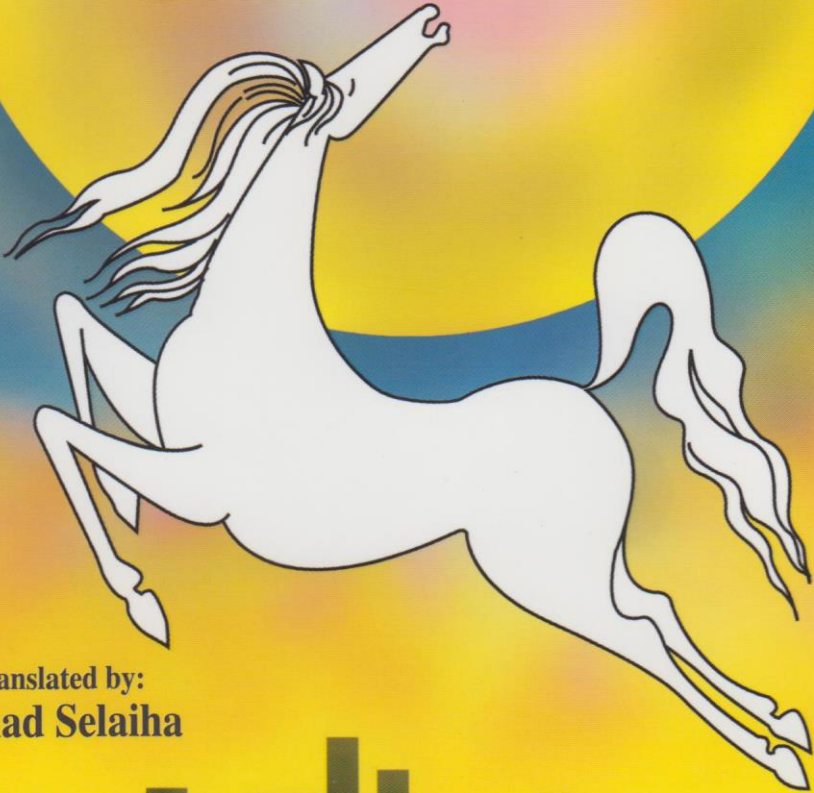


SOUAD AL-SABAH

*Take Me To  
The Borders  
of the Sun*



Translated by:  
**Nehad Selaiha**



## Epigraphs

*This is a land which will not let  
A woman lead the caravan.*

*There is a woman at the beginning  
of all great things.*

(Lamartine)



*Woman is the most wonderful creation  
if she knows her own worth.*

(Gladstone)

*Man is God's prose;  
woman, his poetry.*

(Napoleon)

*Look into the heart of any woman  
and you find a mother.*

(Michelet)



## **Introduction**

Souad Al-Sabah published her first collection of poems, *Early Flashes*, in 1961 when she was barely nineteen. It marked the beginning of a life-long journey of poetic exploration and achievements which has yielded fourteen volumes of verse and promises to yield more. Al-Sabah's creative, intellectual and emotional energies have continued to grow and expand over the years and, judging by her latest poems, show no signs of flagging. Indeed, her most recent volumes – *A Woman Without Shores*, *Take Me to the Borders of the Sun* and *A Poem is a Female*, the *Female a Poem* – show her at the height of her poetic powers and technical prowess, in full command of her idiom and still capable of capturing the essence of an experience in its fleeting moments, sensuous impressions and subtle nuances.

As one of the leading poets in Arabic, El-Sabah has an invigoratingly fresh, distinctive voice, at once pensive and passionate, delicately lyrical and vibrantly dramatic. Whether she speaks of love or politics, and whatever the mood, her poems are consistently vigorous, provocative and exhilarating.

You never feel that she comes to poetry with a fully formed idea or a clear subject. Rather, the poem strikes you as a battleground of conflicting impulses and thoughts, a sensitive register of a profoundly sympathetic mind struggling to make sense of its own experience of the world without preconceptions and define itself in relation to it. The struggle is never conceptual or abstract; we experience it through a well-contrived persona, continuously projected in a variety of moods and situations, in different, vividly evoked environments, as both an involved party, in the grip of the experience, and a detached observer making incisive comments. In this struggle too, almost invariably, the intimately personal is also intensely political.

Indeed, one could say that Souad El-Sabah's perception of the world, herself and own experience is grounded in a sense of paradox which informs all her work. As an Arab woman in a conservative society, she seemed destined by history and culture to one sphere – the private, feminine and domestic – where she felt an alien. Inwardly driven to seek her real spiritual home in poetry and responsible public action, both traditionally male domains, she was deeply resented and made to feel more of an

alien, something of a monstrosity in fact. Her liberal, mind and independent spirit clashed violently with the culture she had imbibed as a child and which continued to besiege and cripple her; and though a lover of Kuwait, her homeland, she did not hesitate to unleash her fury against what she perceived as the forces of darkness, indeed of death there. The violence of the invective, its urgency and the corrosive mode in which she expresses it betray a personal sense of danger, a feeling of terrible threat which suggests, in turn, a postmodern awareness of the insidious power of ideology, of the fact that however hard one tries to rid oneself of it, traces of it could sediment at a deeper layer of one's consciousness and continue to lurk in the hidden recesses of the mind, imperceptibly influencing one's thoughts and deeds. In her battle against the dominant, repressive, patriarchal ideology she inherited from her native culture, Al-Sabah seems to realize that there is no final victory, that the battle has to be fought over and over.

Nowhere is this fear and hatred of oppression more powerfully expressed than in *The Night Fatima Was Arrested*, one of her wittiest and most vigorous and scathing satires. It begins with a shocking, three-line statement, all the more disturbing for its seemingly neutral, matter of fact tone:



This is a country where female poems are circumcised  
And the sun is strangled as it rises

In the interests of family security;

The tone, however, soon changes to one of rising anxiety in the rest of the stanza and the shift is effected by the use of repetition in an obsessive manner and short, breathless one-foot lines:

(A country) Where a woman is slain if she dares to  
speak,

To think,

To write,

Or love,

In order to cleanse the family honour.

The pattern is repeated in the following stanzas in which the homeland is metaphorically transformed into a mythical monster that feeds on its offspring and where animal and nature imagery is used to expand the meaning and identify the oppression of women as a violation of nature and a heinous sin against life:

This is a land that has devoured its women

Then lain back happily

Under the lacerating sun, in the midday heat.

This is the mythical land of Wak-Wak where thinking  
is forbidden,  
Women are slaughtered on their bridal beds like  
camels,  
Fish are forbidden to swim  
And birds to fly...  
This is a land which hates the rosebud that blooms,  
Resents its fragrance,  
And only dreams of sex and bed.

This is a land which has closed its skies  
And mummified its women,  
Declaring their faces a source of shame,  
Their voices a source of shame,  
All thought a source of shame,  
Poetry, a source of shame,  
And love, a source of shame,  
Together with the green moon and blue letters.

This is a land which has abolished spring from the  
calendar,

Abolished winter,  
Abolished eyes and weeping.  
This is a land which has taken leave of its senses  
And chosen to live in a coma.

What could these slumbering, indolent, indifferent  
cities want from me –  
A predatory, savage fighter?  
If it is my mind they want,  
I'd rather not have one.  
What should a woman do with all her rains?  
All her rivers?  
How can she grow flowers and roses,  
Out of this stony, arid land?

What do they want from a woman in our land?  
Do they want her boiled?  
Do they want her grilled?  
Do they want her flesh and fat kneaded and baked in a  
pie?  
Do they want her a sugar doll

Ready for copulation at all times?  
Do they want her young and ignorant?  
Well, the above are the ten commandments a woman  
should observe  
To preserve the family heritage.

The poem ends on a desperate note of affirmation which reveals a sharp awareness of the lethal dangers that beset the quest for freedom:

I am sorry,  
But I will never give up my sharp nails  
And will go on, as always,  
Marching ahead of the caravan,  
And will fight for this till death –  
My enemy's death, or mine.

The title of the poem quoted above, named after a famous Egyptian television serial based on a novel by Sekina Fuad, and some of its mythical and culinary imagery draw on popular culture and reveal another interesting aspect of Al-Sabah's dialectical imagination: the eclectic combination of elements and motifs from the (high) classical and (low) popular cultural

traditions. To the classical poetic heritage she owes the structural solidity of her verse and some technical features. From the popular heritage, she derives her lively rhythms, vivid idiom and many images and allusions. The fusion of two hierarchically differentiated legacies, with their respective idioms and frames of reference, generates a kind of productive tension on the linguistic, stylistic levels which reflects and consolidates the dominant thematic dialectics of male and female, the individual and society in her poetry.

In the case of the male/female binary opposition which underlies most of her love poems, acting as generative matrix, a synthesis is attempted and sometimes temporarily achieved through the Jungian concepts of anima and animus. El-Sabah subtly hints at the existence of a masculine principle (animus) in the female unconscious and of a feminine principle (anima) in the male unconscious. Patriarchal cultures, however, are keen to suppress this ambivalence in the interest of a clearer, differential opposition of male and female. Souad El-Sabah is aware of the artificiality of this sexist opposition and its ideological directives and ramifications. She recognizes that the 'female' and 'male' identities imposed on men and women by culture are

detrimental social constructs which limit, stunt and warp the natural growth of both into well-integrated, creative, loving human beings. A person who is inwardly split and lacks a sense of human integrity and dignity, she believes, is incapable of loving. This explains the ambivalent attitude towards love we come across in many of the love poems: the longing for physical and spiritual union with the beloved and regarding this union as the fountainhead of life and creativity, on the one hand, and, on the other, the fear of forfeiting one's integrity and independence of spirit and, therefore, one's humanity in such a union.

In *The Moon and the Beast*, one of her most powerful poems, this divided feeling towards love comes across very vividly in a startling combination of tender sentiments and violent imagery. The poem also clearly points to the root cause of the problem, blaming it on the patriarchal culture which enshrines male dominance and female submission, and expresses a sense of rising frustration which reaches a desperate edge:

Two forces fight within me:  
The desire to be your love  
And the fear of becoming your prisoner.

The moon wrestles with the beast,  
The white with the black,  
The existentialist with the Sufi,  
Revolution with counter revolution  
The craving to be with you  
And the urge to kill you.

Two seas battle within me:  
My temperate, feminine sea  
And a masculine one of yours,  
Planted with mines and pirates  
And teeming with savage fish.  
My sandy shores struggle against your waves,  
And my forests against your tropical rains.

Loving you, I face  
Two choices and have no third:  
To retire into the copper cell of your chest,  
Or walk out into the sun of freedom;  
To surrender to the force of history,

Or take up arms against it;  
To submit to your authoritarian discourse,  
Or mutiny against your heaven-inspired, sacred words.

Deep inside me  
Resentment merges  
With maternal feelings,  
A sense of security  
With a foreboding of imminent storms.  
I live out my days with you  
Suspended  
Between the trees of fire on your lips  
And an abysmal void below.

When I am alone, your voice assaults me  
Like a wolf with flaming eyes.  
It leaves a gash in my neck,  
A wound in my memory,  
A stab in my waist,  
A slit in my sheets.  
And every night it kneads me like a dough,



With cinnamon, saffron  
And spices hot.  
I am torn, into a thousand shreds,  
Between your civilized paper-cover  
And real aggression on females,  
Between the fire of your words  
And your frosty kisses,  
Between your patriarchal views  
And narcissistic postures,  
Between your boundless liberalism  
And equally boundless reactionism.

The thematic dialectic of the individual versus society which, as I mentioned earlier, constitutes another dominant element in Souad Al-Sabah's poetry, is sometimes projected in the poems through another dialectic in which nature is the thesis and history the antithesis. In this context, the individual is defined as a free woman and identified with nature, not as a sentimentalized concept, but as a living, productive/destructive force. History, on the other hand, is seen as a male product which consists mainly of feuds, violent, bloody deeds and acts of aggression. No wonder the persona who speaks in the Revolt of

the Leather-bound Chickens, who describes herself a “a woman from a distant sphere/ A distant star,” describes her lover as one who has “emerged/ Out of a dusty book” in whose eyes she could “see the era of the Mamelukes live again/And glimpse the slave market.” She berates him for guarding the shameful legacy of capitalist greed and female oppression bequeathed to him by his ancestors: “Carry on, she says,”

As your ancestors used to do  
When they bought women  
As if they were estates  
And regarded them  
As a source of humiliation  
And a shameful disgrace.

Carry on as jackals do,  
Spreading terror through the desert,...

I'm not the woman for you, sir.  
Look for another  
That looks like a carpet  
In the court of Harun Al-Rashid.

Carry on

The same as all the tribe's men:

Invade, decimate,

Advance, retreat,

For in the history of your ignorance

There is nothing new.

Carry on

The same as jackals do,

But you can never eat my flesh

Or shear my wool.

For know you that my body is sacred land....

Given the dialectical nature of Souad El-Sabah's poetic imagination it is not surprising that, structurally, her favourite poetic modes are the dramatic monologue and the confidential public speech. Whether the subject is love or politics, she assumes a silent audience who listens, be it a lover whom her persona addresses in intimate surroundings, in a situation fraught with conflict and tension, or a congregation of sympathetic listeners in a public arena. But even when she opts for the solitary mode of the confessional soliloquy, the poems often take the form of a dialogue with the self and the same dramatic quality is discernible. This makes her poetry best appreciated when orally delivered. In such recitals, Al-Sabah

turns a poem into a lively dramatic performance which thrills the audience and tickles them to laughter sometimes even as it challenges their inherited views, cherished ideas and hallowed assumptions. But even in print, one cannot fail to be struck by El-Sabah's astringent wit, her delicious, often sardonic sense of humour and her ability to turn irony into a lethal weapon. Unfortunately, even the best of translations cannot do justice to this aspect of the poetry which relies in part on punning and local cultural references. The title of the last poem quoted above, *The Revolt of the Leather-bound Chickens*, for instance, involves an intelligent play on the word "leather-bound" – "mujallad" in Arabic – which when used, quite unexpectedly, to describe chicken immediately evokes a similar word, "mujammad" which differs from it only in one letter and means "frozen." This kind of word-play is far from gratuitous, intended merely to amuse. In the context of the poem, it can suggest a cluster of related meanings: one can detect a hidden comparison between the 'covering' or 'binding' of women in some societies, which freezes their existence and degrades them to the level of conserved, marketable edibles, and the mental rigidity of their males who, like the lover in the poem, are prisoners of the dusty (and no doubt leather-bound) book of history. And since frozen chickens are an invention of modern, industrialized society and

usually sold in supermarkets, their appearance in the context of a culture which, under the thin veneer of civilization, is far from modern or industrialized, constitutes a sharp, satirical dig at cultural hypocrisy.

The word-play also paradoxically identifies the commodification of women as "frozen chickens" with their false valorization as treasured, "leather-bound" or "mummified" cultural possessions. Compared to frozen chickens, women are seen to fare much worse: unlike their feathered sisters they never thaw, are never literally consumed and never provide real nourishment to anybody. Like the speaker in *The Moon and the Beast*, they seem doomed to live out their days suspended between trees of fire above, which they can never reach, and an abysmal void below.

Souad El-Sabah has been described as a feminist, which she certainly is in thought and outlook. Her feminism, however, does not stop at the liberation of women. It aspires to liberate men as well, and children, and even nature from the destructive attrition of man. Its ultimate dream is of a human race, unfettered in mind and body, free to create and love.

**Poem I**

**The Graduate**

You, Sir, who hide in my wristwatch  
And join forces with time against me,  
You who make my bracelets your allies,  
Of my lashes and dresses his confederates -  
You who conspire with my books, my papers  
And the smell of coffee against me,  
How I wish you would go on leave.  
The hours with you are unbearable;  
The hours without you are unbearable,  
And time does not take its final shape  
Until it has passed through your fingers.

\* \* \*

And am not complete and whole  
Until I have graduated through your fingers.

Poem II

Fire on the Snow

-1-

You, who look like no other man,  
Whom no other man resembles,  
You are my mirror  
And, in you, how beautiful my face looks.

-2-

The snow in Megeve  
Is black, so black,  
And the skiers on the ice slopes  
Seem to glide on the wires of my nerves.  
Megeve refuses to welcome me,  
To talk to me,  
To acknowledge my legitimate presence  
Except when I am hanging on your left arm.  
Can you get them to recognize me and accept me  
In this exquisite, little French town  
Which has made you its mayor?

-3 -

O, man  
Who has carried away all the snow maps in his pocket  
And left me to glide on my icy sorrows.  
You have consumed all the coffee in France  
And left me to sip my tears.  
Without you here I am shorn of joy,  
Shorn of love,  
And no longer feel a woman.

-4-

The lanes of Megeve are drenched with the smell of your voice;  
The tables in all the cafes are reserved in your name;  
The lovely Savoie cheeses are tasteless without you.  
Your footprints in the snow  
Are carved on the walls of my memory.  
I pray you, give me back  
The maps of this town.

-5-

The clock strikes  
And my sorrows chime with it.



The Alpine winds wrench off my woolen cap  
And the snow burns me with its fire.  
You course through my veins  
One by one,  
Inch by inch,  
Turning all the corners,  
Filling every nook.  
The clock strikes  
And I am armed to the teeth with passion.  
O you who hides in the lashes of a cloud,  
Let your glorious rains pour down.  
My days are parched and cracked with thirst.

-6-

O knight who enfolds me in the mantle of his manhood  
From my north to my south,  
From my lips to my waist,  
O You, who pen love poems on the undulations of my days,  
My heart is a fruit ripe for plucking  
And my pores are open to receive your ships, borne homeward  
on the wind.

O sailor whose lips the salty waves have chapped,  
I am a whole kingdom of women;  
I pray you, cast your anchor on the shores of my heart  
And grant me your fatherly blessings.  
For know you this: I have no home but you,  
No tribe but you,  
No homeland to belong to  
Except you.

-7-

At four o'clock, my passion rages like a sea,  
And bursts all my dams,  
Uproots all my trees  
And pulls down all my language lines,  
All my memory lines.  
At four o'clock  
I burst into flame on the snows of Megeve  
Like a Christmas tree  
And cry aloud until my voice pierces yours,  
Until my roots penetrate your soil,  
And I become a drop in your bloodstream.

-8-

My knight whom I have waited for  
From the dawn of history,  
Since everything began,  
The trees of my tenderness,  
The flowers of my heart are bristling.  
My birds, my fishes  
And the dovecotes of my thoughts are seething.  
Therefore, dismount, my knight  
To share with me  
Moments of poetry... moments of madness.

-9-

What do I do with the heritage of emotions  
You planted in my blood  
Like a jasmine tree?  
What do I do with your voice  
Still pecking like a cock at the face of my sheets?  
What do I do with the imprint of your taste  
Stamped on the furnishings in my room?  
The paintings we chose together?

The books we read together?  
The souvenirs we picked up in cities all over?  
The shells we gathered on the Caribbean shores?  
Tell me, dear sir,  
What do I do with this heavy legacy of memories  
You left on my shoulders  
And on my lips?

I have tried, more than once,  
To rid myself of you and it,  
But was ashamed to sell my past,  
To sell my feelings,  
To sell my braids  
In public auctions.

-10-

Where can I go  
When you have all the maps of the world?  
At which café can I sit  
When you have monopolized all the coffee trees,  
And the very smell of coffee?

Which language can I speak  
When you hold all the keys to my tongue?

I tried deporting you  
To the other side of the moon.  
But when the moon came up,  
You returned with her beams  
And, sketched on my windowpane, I found your face.

I tried to send you to your mother  
Who spoilt you, taught you to be messy,  
And to love collecting stamps...  
Along with women.  
She, however, sent you back by registered mail  
With her best wishes.

Poem III

I Apologize to You

I apologize to you,  
I apologize  
From the depths of my heart  
And the cracks of my thought.  
I apologize  
For all the time we lost  
When you were not my love.  
I apologize for all the summers and winters,  
Autumns and springs  
And every particle of every second  
When I did not protect you with my eyelids  
And feed you with the milk of my tenderness.

-2-

I apologize, my friend,  
For my childhood  
Which slipped away, with no colour, taste, or smell,  
When I could neither read your palms well,

Nor fully grasp the fragrance of your valour.  
I apologize for all my days which were not days,  
My history, which was no history,  
My gardens which did not blossom  
And my skies which did not rain..

-3-

I apologize, my friend,  
For a hundred years of solitude,  
When not a single tree  
Sprouted from my thoughts  
To alter the chronicle of trees,  
Nor a single violet to reshape the story of violets,  
Nor a single poem to change the annals of poetry.

-4-

I apologize, my friend,  
Allbeit belatedly,  
For all the cities I visited without you,  
The Concorde flights I took without you,  
The streets I roamed without you,  
The rain that soaked me,  
The libraries I visited and the books I read without you.

I apologize to you  
For all the lonely hotels where I slept alone  
And wept alone between the walls.  
I am so sorry for all the years I lived an emotional orphan  
Before you became my lord and master.

-5-

I apologize, my master,  
For the fiftieth time,  
For every point of view I had of which you did not approve,  
For every centimeter of my hair  
That did not figure on the list of your property  
For every thread of my robes that did not bloom at your smile.  
I apologize for all the letters  
I wrote to you before my birth  
And never sent you,  
For all the dreams I painted in the colours of the rainbow  
On the walls of my mother's womb  
And you never saw.  
For all the fish I caught  
For you in the lakes of the moon  
And let perish in my hands.



Poem IV

A Man in My Memory

-1-

My problem with you has nothing to do with my heart  
But, rather, with my memory.  
The memory you occupied by force  
A hundred years ago  
Without my permission,  
Against my will  
And without lease.

-2-

For a hundred years  
You have been living in my memory  
As if it were your private apartment,  
Stretching on its cushions when it suited you,  
Hanging your clothes in its wardrobes anytime you wanted,  
Taking your siesta there whenever you wished,  
Making free of its fridge  
And making your coffee there at all hours.

-3-

For a hundred years  
You have clung, like seaweed,  
To the shores of my memory.  
I ask you to leave; you stay.  
I buy you a ticket; you do not go away.  
I pack your suitcases; you unpack them.  
I call the police to arrest you;  
I am the one that gets arrested.

-4-

For a hundred years  
My memory has retained no man but you.  
Of history, it has known nothing but yours;  
Of geography, only the contours of your hands;  
And of culture, only the words of love  
You write on my shift.

-5-

For a hundred years  
I have tried to break through the chalk circle  
In which you locked me,

Hiding the keys in your pocket.  
For a hundred years  
I have tried to convince you to respect human rights  
And the rights of womanhood;  
But, like all the males of the tribe,  
You have stubbornly held on to your property,  
The domains on which the sun never sets,  
And kept your red flags hoisted  
On the ramparts of my memory.

-6-

You who sit enthroned in my memory,  
Release me but for a day from your sovereign sway;  
For every street I walk through carries your name,  
Every café I turn to turns me away,  
Every public park shuts its gates in my face,  
All the boutiques where I shop for clothes  
Refuse to sell me anything before I first consult you.  
So, get out from under my skin  
That I may lead a normal life  
And breathe in a natural way.

-7-

I carry you inside me  
Like a woman in the ninth month of her pregnancy.  
How do I rid myself of you?  
How can I cut the umbilical cord that binds us together  
When you are enmeshed, like a skein of wool,  
In my dreams, my desires and nervous system?  
How can I leave you by the roadside  
Under the snow and rain, at the mercy of violent storms,  
When you are my firstborn  
And also my last?

-8-

The Berlin wall has fallen, sir,  
And the old world has collapsed.  
South Africa has freed itself from the white man's rule  
After three hundred years of bondage.  
Why do you then, 'white man',  
Continue to occupy my memory?  
Why do you go on planting your landmines there  
And raising terrible fires under my pillow?

-9-

How can I uproot you from my memory  
When you cling to it  
As coral reefs cling  
To the rocks of the Red Sea?

-10-

You, who have taken out an eternal lease on my feelings,  
Book yourself into any hotel you like  
And I will foot the bill.  
Go to any café you choose  
And I will pay for your coffee.  
Marry any woman who appeals to you  
And I will put up the money for her dowry.

**Poem V**

**Take Me to the Borders of the Sun**

-1-

Tell me, tell me  
Did you ever love a woman before me  
Who, when she loved,  
Lost the light of reason?

-2-

Tell me, tell me:  
How come that a woman, when she loves,  
Turns into an Arabian jasmine tree?  
Tell me:  
What makes a copy, a mere, shadowy reflection,  
So strikingly resemble its original  
So that the eye is taken for the kohl that borders it?  
What turns a woman in love  
Into a true and certified copy of her lover?

-3-

Speak to me in a tongue  
That no woman has heard before.  
Carry me to an isle of love  
That no one has inhabited before me.  
Let me hear words that lie beyond the bounds of poetry.  
Tell me I am your first love.  
Say that I am your first date,  
Distill your liquid tenderness in my ears  
And plant a moon in my eyes.  
One word of love from you  
Is worth the world.

-4-

You who, like a rose, have taken root in my depths,  
You who, like a toddler, sport on the pupils of my eyes,  
You are whimsical as a child,  
Violent as the waves  
And soft as the sand.  
Pray, let not my voiced longings irritate you.  
Always repeat my name, over and over,

In the hours of dawn and the hours of night.  
I may not be a mistress of the art of silence -  
Forgive my ignorance -  
But if you searched the whole world  
You could not find a woman like me.

-5-

You are my love. Do not leave me  
To drink my patience like a palm tree.  
Since I am you,  
How can I tell the reality from the shadow,  
The original from the copy?



Poem VI

The Scent of Your Voice

-1-

The cafes spin round themselves;  
Your words swirl round my womanhood;  
The memories wind themselves round my neck;  
I run away from the scent of your voice  
And fly to my room.

-2-

You, who have monopolized the geography of the whole world,  
Spare but a little region of my thought  
From your colonial clutch.  
Leave but one of my forts  
Free of your fluttering flags.

-3-

O man of brimstone and fire,  
Knead me like a piece of clay

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---

And shape me:

One hill of silver,

One hill of gold;

One almond kernel

And a mango fruit.

Shape me in your image

For I do not acknowledge any picture of myself

That does not bear your signature.

Poem VII

I Will Always Love You

-1-

I love you,  
Despite your thousands of tiny flaws,  
And know you are unworthy of my gifts.  
And yet, I fling myself into your arms,  
Forgetting where I am,  
Not knowing whether I was coming  
Or going.

-2-

I love you,  
To the point of naïveté ,  
To the point of stupidity,  
And know that, at the end, I shall drown  
In a puddle of water.  
Forgive my idiocy.

-3-

I love you so much,  
And know that your temperament  
Is lightning, thunder and storm clouds,  
That I have wedded winter.  
I know that going on is hard,  
That going back is harder,  
And that your seas have no beginning  
Or end.

I love you so much  
And know full well  
That I am building a kingdom in the air.

-4-

I love you so much,  
And know I shall conquer the impossible  
And touch the roof of the sky.  
I love you recklessly,  
To the point of evaporation,  
To the point of identification,  
To the point of extinction.

-5-

I love you boundlessly, unconditionally,  
And know I have crossed every red line  
And burnt half the country I left behind.  
I love you heedlessly,  
And from the start have known  
That I shall pay for it.

-6-

I love you so much  
And how I wish I didn't.  
But it is a weakness in women  
That when in love  
We cannot distinguish between the foot of a mountain  
And a hill,  
Between a few lines and the whole book,  
Between rewards and penalties.  
In our passionate yearning  
We cannot tell the difference between prophet and usurer.  
I love you so much;  
I wonder if I am courting my own destruction?

-7-

Little dictator,  
I do not blame you no matter what you do,  
No matter how you repress my feelings,  
Smash my fancies  
And play the tyrant.  
You have never been really strong,  
But my weakness made you rank among the mighty.  
You have never been really great,  
But I, myself,  
Have raised you, upon my love, to the sky.

-8-

O Master,  
Forgive my madness.  
I am primitive in my whims  
And, like me, my passion is primitive.  
I will always love you,  
No matter how weary of it I get,  
How much I scream,  
How hard I protest.

Through I may want to free myself of my Arabian kohl  
And chestnut hair,  
I shall still love you,  
And will do so  
Until it makes you bleed,  
Until it makes me bleed.

Poem VIII

**The night Fatima Was Arrested<sup>1</sup>**

-1-

This is a country where female poems are circumcised  
And the sun is strangled as it rises  
In the interests of family security,  
Where a woman is slain if she dares to speak,  
To think,  
To write,  
Or love,  
In order to cleanse the family honour.

-2-

This is a land which frowns upon female dissenters,  
Angry women,  
Or women who violate

---

1. Named after a famous Egeptian television serial, based on a novel by Sikina Fouad, about a woman who dedicates her life to raising her brothers; however, when she falls in love, they betray her Resistance-fighter lover to the military police to prevent her enjoying a life of her own, eventually getting her arrested as well.



Family rituals

This is a land which will not let

A woman lead the caravan.

-3-

This is a land that has devoured its women

Then lain back happily

Under the lacerating sun, in the midday heat.

This is the mythical land of Wak-Wak where thinking is forbidden,

Women are slaughtered on their bridal beds like camels,

Fish are forbidden to swim

And birds to fly...

This is a land which hates the rosebud that blooms,

Resents its fragrance,

And only dreams of sex and bed.

-4-

This is a land which has closed its skies

And mummified its women,

Declaring their faces a source of shame,

Their voices a source of shame,

All thought a source of shame,  
Poetry, a source of shame,  
And love, a source of shame,  
Together with the green moon and blue letters.

-5-

This is a land which has abolished spring from the calendar,  
Abolished winter,  
Abolished eyes and weeping.  
This is a land which has taken leave of its senses  
And chosen to live in a coma.

-6-

What could these slumbering, indolent, indifferent cities want  
from me -  
A predatory, savage fighter?  
If it is my mind they want,  
I'd rather not have one.  
What should a woman do with all her rains?  
All her rivers?  
How can she grow flowers and roses,  
Out of this stony, arid land?

-7-

What do they want from a woman in our land?

Do they want her boiled?

Do they want her grilled?

Do they want her flesh and fat kneaded and baked in a pie?

Do they want her a sugar doll

Ready for copulation at all times?

Do they want her young and ignorant?

Well, the above are the ten commandments a woman should observe

To preserve the family heritage.

-8-

I am sorry,

But I will never give up my sharp nails

And will go on, as always,

Marching ahead of the caravan,

And will fight for this till death -

My enemy's death, or mine.

**Poem IX**

**A Fish Back in Water**

-1-

Here I am, facing the sea of Beirut once more,  
Hoping to renew my friendship with its fishes and birds,  
And my dialogue with the colour blue  
After a long, debilitating thirst,  
Giddy distances,  
And the siege of arid times.

-2-

Here I am, leaping up like a fish  
On Al-Uza'i beach  
And lying on the warm sand  
After a hundred years of sleeping on a bed of sorrow.

-3-

Here I am, breaking down the walls of memory  
And stepping into the city that has taught me

How to read the book of liberty,  
Explore the scope of my dreams  
And the dimensions of my womanhood.

-4-

It is not true  
That Beirut is bounded by the sea on the east  
And by the mountains on the west.  
It is a boundless city,  
Just like a dream, like poetry and liberty.

-5-

It is not true  
That Beirut is just another poem of the Mediterranean Sea;  
Beirut is all the poetry there is.

-6-

Beirut put kohl in my eyes,  
Perfumed me,  
Made me beautiful  
And adorned my wrist with a gold bracelet

Which I never took off  
For more than thirty years.

-7-

Beirut planted a rose in my hair  
And its petals and leaves have retained their moisture  
For more than thirty years.

-8-

Beirut gave me the keys to poetry  
And the lamp of culture;  
The lamp is still shining in my room  
As it has done for more than thirty years

-9-

In the Sixties  
I was like a desert palm waiting for the rain,  
Like a daisy  
Looking for a pot to hold her;  
And in Beirut I found the pot  
And washed in the rains of freedom.

-10-

A year after I came to the birthplace of the moon,  
I started writing poetry  
In the notebook of the moon,  
And learning the language of birds in Zahla,

The language of pine trees in Dahour Al-Shuweir,  
The language of the snow in mount Sanein,  
And the language of the sea in the voice of Fairouz <sup>(1)</sup>.

-11-

And in Alia,  
Among the grapevines and cherry trees  
And oleanders  
I gave birth to my sweetest poem: my son Mubarak.  
Lebanon has thus conferred upon me two Degrees that make me  
proud:  
A degree in the art of living;  
And another in motherhood.

---

1. Great Lebanese singer, highly appreciated all over the Arab world and in parts of Europe.

-12-

Our house in Al-Yarza has taught me  
How to make the trees my friends,  
How to wash with the music of the rain  
And relish the night symphony of the crickets.

-13-

The war could not defeat Lebanon:  
It could not crush the Lebanese dream,  
Quench the Lebanese glow,  
Or quash the Lebanese power to excel.  
It could not clip the wings of its ambition,  
Or silence its beautiful voice,  
Or assassinate the pride of its pines and the splendour of its  
ballads.

-14-

The war could not  
Silence Gibran's <sup>(2)</sup> voice,  
Or Elias Abu Shabaka's <sup>(3)</sup>,

---

2. Famous Lebanese émigré poet of the early 20th Century.

3. Famous Lebanese émigré poet of the early 20th Century.



Or Al-Akhtal Al-Saghir's<sup>(4)</sup>.

It could perhaps burn down stone

And concrete

And put out the street lamps,

But it certainly could never extinguish the civilization of

Sidon and Sur<sup>(5)</sup>

Or stop Cadmus from sailing in search of the impossible<sup>(6)</sup>.

-15-

Seventeen years have passed since the great fire of Beirut.

But Beirut has proved greater than its death,

Greater than those who destroyed and burned her;

Seventeen years in the blazing fire,

And she still glows under the ashes

Like a gold nugget.

---

4. Al-Akhtal al-Saghir was the pen-name used by Bishara El-Khori.

5. Sur is otherwise known as Tyre and in modern Lebanese Arabic, Sidon is known as Saïda.

6. In Greek mythology, a Phoenician prince who killed a dragon and planted its teeth, from which sprang a multitude of warriors who fought among themselves until only five remained, who joined Cadmus to found Thebes.

Poem X

**I Am a Thousand Times  
More Beautiful**

-1-

Because you like long, black hair,  
The women of Asia have let the curtains of night down their  
backs  
In your honour, O king,  
And have forsworn the cutting of hair.

-2-

Because you like dark brown complexions,  
They have bathed in the sun to welcome you  
As you ride in on the horse of passion.

-3-

Because you like the natural look of my face,  
The women of Asia have washed their faces  
In the tropical rains

And bathed in rose water

In your honour.

And because you like my face to look natural as the morning  
lily,

God has worked wonders painting the face of Singapore.

-4-

And because you love me

The world has grown larger,

The sky vaster,

The sea bluer,

The birds freer,

And I, a thousand times more beautiful.

Poem XI

**Your Voice Is My Home**

-1-

The sheets of your moonlike voice wrap me round  
Like a little girl hugging her new toy  
On the eve of the 'Eid.

-2-

Your voice is a nightingale, a summer,  
A Swiss forest.  
Your voice is firewood, candles  
And smouldering embers.

-3-

Your voice is a warm, woolen shawl  
Which I wear on cold and frosty nights.  
Your voice is an umbrella, a rain cloud, a book of poetry.  
Your voice is the shoulder I lean on.  
Your voice is my home.

Poem XII

Symphony in Gray

-1-

My loved ones,  
I would have liked to read you  
Some love poetry tonight.  
For a woman, whatever her age,  
Race,  
Or colour,  
Is always intoxicated by any talk of love.  
I would have liked to carry you away for a few seconds  
From the kingdom of sand to the kingdom of grass.  
My loved ones,  
I would have liked to make you hear  
Something of the heart's music,  
But we live in an Arab age  
In which the heart has stopped beating.

-2-

My loved ones,

How can I

Turn a blind eye to the plight of a homeland gripped in the  
fangs of terror?

How can I

Pass over this state of spiritual bankruptcy,  
Of national frustration,  
Of drought and dearth?

-3-

My loved ones,

I would have liked to take you into the age of poetry;

But the world, alas, has turned into a wild, demented beast

That devours poetry.

My loved ones,

I hope to learn from you

How a person at the bottom of a well can sing of freedom.

I hope to learn from you

How a rose can grow on the tree of oppression.

I hope to learn from you

How a bard can sing his poems

As he rotates like a chicken on a spit over coals.

-4-

My loved ones,  
This is neither the age of poetry nor of poets:  
For how can corn grow out of the bodies of the poor?  
Can a rose grow out of the gallows?  
Or the eyes of the dead  
Put forth red flowers?  
Can a poem rise out of the shambles of history  
Or a drop of water leak out of the memory of man?

-5-

Like the grains of Chinese rice  
The features of killers are alike everywhere:  
A corpse bewails a corpse,  
A skull laments over another skull,  
The shoe of an unknown victim lies buried next to the shoe of  
another,  
And no one knows anything about the tomb of Al-Hallaj  
Since half of those murdered in the history of thought  
Remain nameless.

**Poem XIII**

**Beirut : Once a Rose,  
Now a Cause**

-1-

Beirut, poem of all poems,  
Rose of the sea, island of dreams,  
All my beautiful days traced  
In the sand, on the sea shells and clouds...  
Love letters carried on the wings of doves...  
My long hair spread out  
On the Roshia rock, the Yarza beach,  
And the white sails...  
The joy of losing myself, like a child, in Al-Hamra street.

-2-

I arrive from Kuwait  
Like a tired palm tree that needs to rest.  
I come to the house which has fed me its bread,  
To the breast that has suckled me.



I come to you longing  
To thank the letter of the alphabet that has educated me,  
To thank the sea which  
To the borders of the sun has sent me.

-3-

In Beirut, I seek  
The colour of my eyes, the measure of my height.  
I look for the good, old days and for my memories.  
I look for my first letters,  
My first relationships,  
My first dates  
And all the love poems which my tribe denounces.

-4-

I come to Beirut  
To meet my friend the sea,  
To meet my friend the muse,  
For when Beirut is away,  
There are no beautiful poems to read,  
And not even a piece of decent prose.

And when Beirut is out of sight,  
One loses sight of life.

-5-

In Beirut, I look for  
My first possessions which I left in my room,  
For the poetry volumes that I left crying on the bookshelves,  
I wait for the September showers and look for my umbrella,  
And the romantic novels I used to stuff secretly into my bag.  
Who can give me back my childhood?  
Who can restore my memories?

-6-

I come to Beirut  
To find my love and loved ones,  
To seek the tarweeqa of spiced baked beans at Murawash's,  
The coffee vendors on the Corniche,  
The manqusha thyme-sprinkled loaf and my favourite  
newspaper.

-7-

Transparent-eyed Beirut,

Pearl of the sea,  
Mare sporting in the playing-fields of freedom,  
O rose that has shed its perfumed petals  
And become a cause.

-8-

I come to Beirut  
To look for the notebook  
Where I used to scribble some poetry in the old days.  
I look for my notebooks here  
Since in my country they have banned paper, ideas and pens.  
I search in Beirut for words  
To speak back home where speech is forbidden,  
Love of any kind is forbidden,  
Poetry in any form is forbidden,  
And even fasting and prayer.

-9-

In Beirut, I look  
For the freedom of love, and my own freedom;  
For poetry becomes no city in the world

But Beirut,  
And love becomes no city in the world  
But Beirut,  
And no city in the whole world resembles me  
But Beirut.

-10-

How gloriously the days pass in Zahla  
And Shattoura  
Where the clinking of glasses never stops,  
Lovers' eyes never sleep  
And poetry keeps a vigil till dawn.  
I wish I were like the birds  
That fly in yearning, at every moment, to the land of the Levant.

-11-

In Beirut, I feel a different woman  
In this male-dominated age  
Which once blocked my mind,  
And another, my womanhood.  
I come to Beirut to be alive for just one day  
And keep a date with my freedom.

-12-

I come to you today, Beirut,  
To get away from my mental anxiety,  
The pressures of national calamities  
And the fallacy of peace.  
I come from a land terribly backward,  
Deeply split  
And irreparably fragmented..  
I come to you from a culture of selling and buying  
Ruled over by benighted intellectuals.

-13-

I come to you today, Beirut,  
Walking through a minefield,  
Fleeing cities that have incinerated their history,  
Abandoned the principles of Arab civilization  
And forsaken those of Islam.

-14-

I come to the south of Lebanon  
Where the land puts forth lemons, olives

*Take Me To The Borders of the Sun*

---

And heroes

And sprouts pride, chivalry and men.

I come to the south of Lebanon

To kiss the swords, the horses and the blades;

And all the while a question hangs on my lips:

Has this spot become the sole base of resistance in the Arab  
world?

Poem IV

Symphony of the Land

-1-

This is the symphony of the great land.  
It strikes on  
And on  
Like the blows of fate:  
One blow in Bethlehem,  
Another in Gaza,  
A third in Nazareth.  
It has turned the wheel of fortune against us  
And knocked us off our feet.

With a lightning stroke, it has swept away the names of all the  
leaders,  
Sealed with sealing-wax the dens of all politicians  
And all the dope joints,  
And slaughtered all the cowardly, bovine party.  
Retire, therefore, all poet laureates,

For the poetry we know, no longer acknowledges masters or  
princes;

It knows only one prince: the stone-thrower.

-2-

This is the symphony of the glorious land  
Striking on and on  
Like the peals of bells,  
The rhythmic beats of a poem,  
And bringing us lightning and rain.  
It has set fire to the papers of all the literati,  
Knocked cut the teeth of all orators  
And summarily dispatched them to hell.  
Roll out the carpets, then, and sprinkle them with roses  
In honour of the Intifada children, the stone-throwers <sup>(1)</sup>,  
And shower them with flowers,  
For they have proved that Israel is only a house of glass  
And it has been shattered.

---

1. Intifadah is the Arabic word for the Palestinian uprising.



-3-

The news arrive like fluttering butterflies,  
One item after another,  
Reporting a stone thrown, then another,  
And heaping corn, oleander flowers and roses on our eyelids.  
Behold our children,  
Carrying the sun in their satchels,  
Creating the times to come, hunting the thunder  
And rebelliously rejecting the legacy of of 'Ad and Thamud.  
Behold our own flesh and blood  
Exploding the Hebrew Age,  
Consigning the Ten Commandments to the fire,  
And abolishing Jewish mythology.

-4-

How wonderful,  
O, how wonderful  
To see the land at last speaking  
And the trees walking.  
There they are, sprouting like grass  
In all the streets:

This girl looks like a sprig of wild mint,  
And that boy like the moon.  
Behold them marching in lines towards death,  
Like field-sparrows,  
And returning to their tents with fingerless hands.  
Leave your doors open then,  
Late into the night, and wait:  
The Messiah may come  
Or you may glimpse among their ranks  
The face of Ali <sup>(2)</sup>  
Or Omar <sup>(3)</sup>.

- 
2. Ali was Prophet Mohamed's cousin and right hand in the early years of Islam and slept in the Prophet's bed to delude his enemies when the Prophet left for Yathreb to escape persecution, thus putting his life at great risk. Later he became the Prophet's son-in-law when he married his daughter, Fatima. Years after the Prophet's death, he became the fourth Caliph of Muslims after Abu Bakr, Omar Ibn Al-Khattab and Othman Ibn Affan. He is highly venerated by all Muslims, but especially so by the Shi'ites.
  3. Omar Ibn Al-Khattab was the third Caliph of Muslims after Prophet Mohamed's death and was reputed for his frugality and justice.

-5-

Resist, beautiful hands,  
Resist, tender hands still moist  
With the sap of childhood.  
Never heed the tribe's lies.  
We could not liberate a single handspan of the land of Palestine,  
But those blessed, Heaven-sent hands have set us free.

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