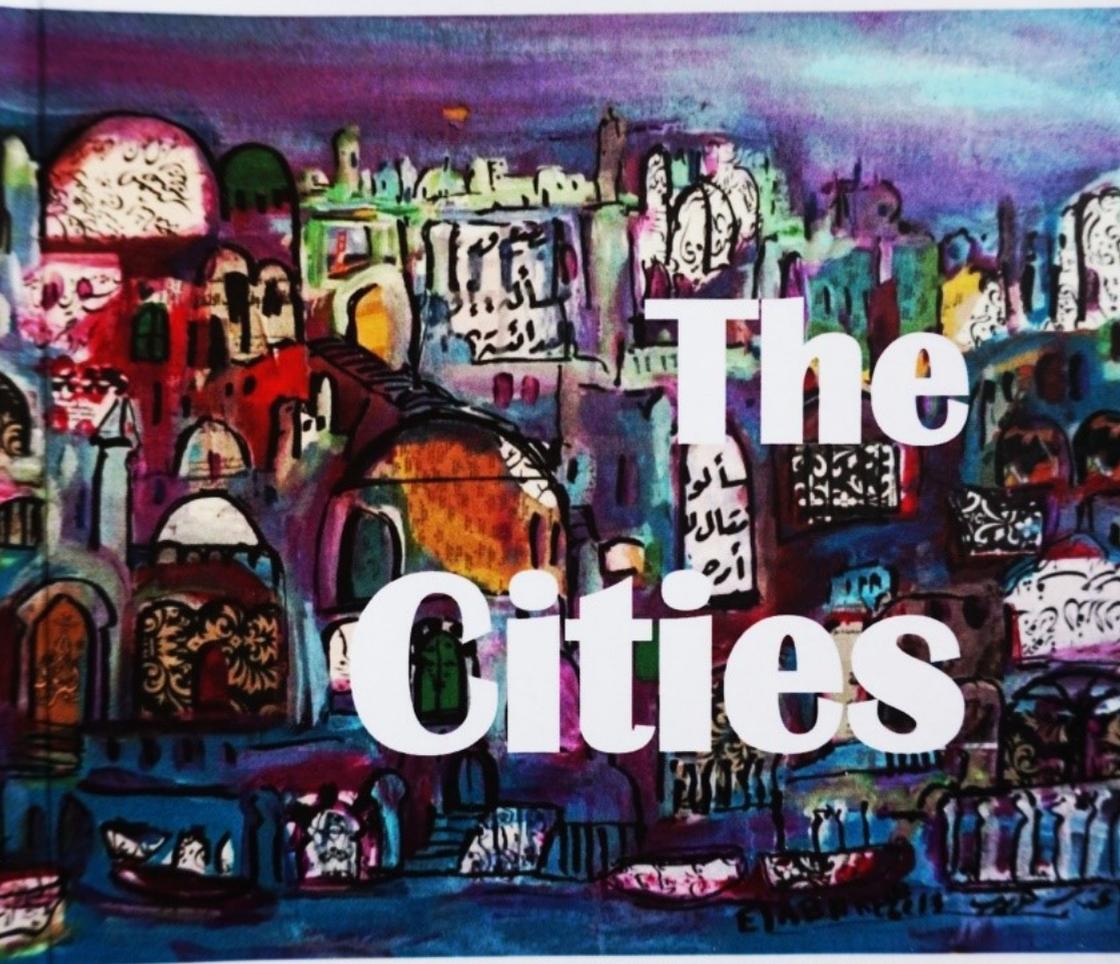


Ghassan Alameddine



# The Cities

*Translated from Arabic by*

Raghid Nahhas



**Ghassan Alameddine**

# **THE CITIES**

**Selected Poetry**

**Translated from Arabic by**

**Raghid Nahhas**

# The Cities

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كَلِمَات

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Paintings: **Etab Hrieb**

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## FOREWORD

I first met Ghassan Alameddine, in the year 2000, when our mutual friend Nehmat Abdo arranged for us a ‘get-together’ at her place in Sydney.

During that meeting, Ghassan handed me his first poetry collection, ‘A Thread of Whiteness’.

In his presentation to me, he wrote: *Dr Raghd Nabbas, the other migrant, who I long to have a place at his side on his long road of displacement.*

I translated a few poems from that collection and published them in *Kalimat* 3, September 2000.

The present book comprises my translations of a selection from his six collections, listed below.

*A Thread of Whiteness.* خيط بياض

Dar al-Massar, Beirut 1999.

*When a Flock of Butterflies Struck the Window Glass.*

حين سرب فراشات اصطدم بجدار النافذة

Dar an-Nahar, Beirut 2004.

*I Suspect They Died Thirsty.* يساورني ظنّ أنّهم ماتوا عطشى

All Prints Distributors and Publishers,  
Beirut 2008.

*The Magician's Folded Scarf.* محرمة الساحر المطوية  
Dar an-Nahda al-Arabia, Beirut 2011.

*Green under Locust Swarms.* أخضر في سهول الجراد  
Self-published, 2015.

*The Cities.* (Unpublished manuscript.) المذُن

We thank Dr **Louise Wakeling** for reviewing the manuscript. Her insightful comments are included at the end of this collection, with our deepest appreciation.

We sincerely thank the acclaimed Syrian painter **Etab Hrieb** who kindly provided us with photos of some of her work to use for the present collection.

Etab Hrieb is an award-winning artist who exhibited in various parts of the world. In addition to her full-time work as an artist, she teaches fine arts, and designs costumes for theatre, film and drama. She currently lives in USA.

*Ragbid Nabhas*

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Do you still want to say  
the same word  
to the same woman,  
the tree,  
the road,  
the café,  
and the same world?

*Ghassan Alameddine*

The **8** Cities

**A THREAD OF  
WHITENESS**

The **10** Cities

## A LOOK

I stretch my hand  
like a man  
dead  
for a thousand years  
longing  
for a look.

# LOST

I open the skull of time  
like a lost sailor ...  
Generations crowd in  
with death  
and slanders  
and skeletons.

## THE FIRST

I needed a lot of silence  
before I dug my first grave  
and seemed unknown  
like a slain stranger.

# WHO

I will fire  
in the direction of  
the one who  
because of his intense presence  
disappears.

## I AM NOT

I am not a stranger  
to the passers-by  
for them to plunder  
my umbrellas.

## **AS IF I**

Faces pass by me  
as if I saw them  
in times that  
followed my death.

## AND AS IF HE

The night  
has emptied itself  
except for a drunk  
drawing on the pavements  
the map of his delirium  
as if the spider  
that shared his silence  
had disappeared.

## RELICS

let the questions of the dead fall,  
their laughter rolls  
into the kiln of my days  
to tell me about  
those who, at dawn,  
carried the tools of  
the night  
and the future ...

scraping  
the relics of their shadows  
off the walls.

## RITUALS

Hollow eyes  
    of ghosts  
around the dissection table  
perform the rituals of  
the souls of mothers  
who love sex with their children.  
At the end of the pathway  
they write the end of the play  
on my face.

## OTHER PLACES

All the matchsticks dropped  
from my box.  
How can I burn  
the coal of dreams?  
I couldn't even find  
the ashes of the black tree  
I used to ignite with my desires.  
For a long time I have thought that  
the day is born from a deformed night  
and the sea is the only place to drown.

## IN A FACTORY

In a few moments  
my eyes will become two screens  
displaying the workers  
and Leo, our Indian supervisor  
who has never read Gandhi.  
Let's smoke.  
Let's have a drink.

My co-worker says, 'Forget about  
the oppressed peoples.  
In a few moments  
midnight shall strike this city.  
Freedom is as far away as this door.'

## SALT

the screen is half-drawn  
the doors closed  
the drizzle outside is not enough  
to expose the images  
of those salted in my memory.

## TREE ... HOME ... COAL

*To my brother Ahmad*

It is no use  
remembering you or  
writing about your absence.  
It would not have been appropriate  
that I depart so that you write about me.  
All throughout the night you left me alone:  
I did not see any of the dreams  
you promised me.

I did not know you were so selfish—  
enjoying all this whiteness and sleep alone.  
You withdrew, like the threads of light  
of a sun suddenly eclipsed,  
driven to where the eternal morning lies.  
What if you had given me more time?  
Didn't I promise you I would invent a drug  
that does not kill its addicts?

I know that this is no time  
for reproach or writing  
but how do I explain this pain  
and these drums in my memory?  
Those we loved here:  
one is killed by bullets

and a ray that decapitated him,  
one who lifted her steps  
so she would not disturb the ground,  
one who carried her cancer  
from basement to pavement to tavern.

Trees, homes, utensils, places,  
birds, animals and coal.  
The sun has disappeared.  
The night is almost covering the hills and plains;  
can the heart contain the river?  
I thought you were carried,  
escorted to your final resting place.  
I did not notice that you were  
the merriest of the laughers  
in the procession.

# CELEBRATION

my last celebration  
is to take with me  
all my faces.



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**WHEN A FLUTTER  
OF BUTTERFLIES  
STRUCK  
THE WINDOW GLASS**



## A DAY

Today is fit for walking in all directions.

I walk toward some faraway red circle:  
it disappears.

I run away from it:  
it follows me  
like an assassin.

On my way to the wash basin  
I try to find a fishing rod  
to catch the fish  
floating in my head  
all night.

## ASLEEP

The rain that has fallen tonight  
is enough to drown the world.  
Your hollow chest  
cannot contain this crowd of the naked.  
Don't recite your poem across the phone.  
Don't throw your clouds out of the window  
lest the dead notice ...  
My brother may appear on the balcony  
while a full-fledged militia is firing bullets.

My father requests a cup of water.  
The rumbling soars.  
Those asleep are coughing.

The winter night is long  
should the pounding stop.

And the dog stops barking.

## THIS IS NOT JUST AN IDEA

... of course  
this wasn't just pulling out an artery  
and tossing it over the asphalt.  
And this is true:  
time nestles among the leaves  
of a tree near the nursing home.  
Words become ropes and pustules.  
True too that I can count the hairs on that skin.  
But, of course, it is impossible  
for the tiles of this roof  
to fall on my head.  
And I say it is just an idea.

How can those continue to march  
with no one coughing  
or scratching his bottom?

Has the war lingered?  
Not at all  
and this is not just an idea.

## **PATHS**

The night advances  
with incisive eyes.

They photograph one another opposite the sea.  
Sri Lankans, Indians and other nationals.  
Their jargon is the squeaking of machines  
in insulated rooms.  
Buses and trains always betray  
the drunk, the strangers and  
those returning to their marital quarters.

This happens whilst  
an army contingent stays put  
aiming at the mail box.

Beauty queens and kings  
male and female fashion models  
masseurs and masseuses  
sway with the music.

Behind closed doors  
some sharpen their knives  
with the lenses of their eyes.  
Women are alone next to the children's beds,  
bitten by the rasps of fear.

Someone descends from an unknown place—  
frightened others soon surround him.  
He knows that the paths never end  
and the place is printed on the heart.

The one who stole the necklace of pleasures  
disappeared  
with the first ray of sunlight.

The sun again:  
Sri Lankans, Indians and other nationals.  
Another day  
to quench desires.

## LIGHT TREMOR

Before reading a book on behaviour  
I must know  
how cities shift boundaries  
how silent men understand  
that poets are not good at writing  
when sitting at giant desks.  
Whenever they approach a home it drifts away  
alarmed by the scent of perfume and cigars.

A man, as if practising a profession,  
sits behind glass to drink coffee.  
He burns cigarettes and the world  
with a wick lighter  
taking pleasure in the smell of burning memories.  
The waiter does not restrain him.  
The voice of the lottery ticket seller  
does not wake him.

Before I read a book on steadfastness or evasion  
I ponder: why would one salt his penis  
and ask the others to sunbathe?

Sometimes  
I feel a light tremor  
as if seasick.

Often  
the roads lead me  
to the homes of strangers.

Lights dance in the water  
taking the shapes of shoes  
wanting half soles.  
The seagull I followed  
with my first step  
is flying away.

Strange indeed:  
there is a sky.

## SQUARES OF DESPAIR

*For Camellia*

I light you  
against the glass of my dreams.  
I peel you  
against the bedroom mirror.  
I spread my breath  
on the white divan  
on these cold floor tiles  
on the pavements of your pleasure.

I listen  
to your heartbeats:  
the squares of despair fall apart  
the spaces of familiarity recede.  
Lighter than a fig leaf  
the lily of love falls  
and the sparrows of desire suffocate ...

Yes  
I light you against the glass of my dreams.  
I have recently realised:  
dreams are like alcoholic drinks—  
they can be bottled.  
I discovered that it is a game

to curtail time and carry on with life ...  
What is fun is that I am not alone.  
Even when I am on my own  
I always fill the bottles with dreams  
on my behalf and theirs  
for me and for them  
for those I love and those I don't.  
Would an unemployed bloke like me  
believe that now he has a job?  
I have become a bottle-filler.

Many drank what was in the bottles.  
In exchange, they filled them with dreams.  
Some died.  
Some grew bored.  
And some, whenever they became jaded  
or yearned for the flasks,  
would burn candles around them  
against the glass of their dreams  
so that joy prevails  
and persists.

I heard about a chameleon who sipped a dream  
and became a bulbul,  
about a poet who lost his dream  
and became a scarecrow.  
Good work:  
if I can only light you

against the glass of my dreams.  
The procession of the dead  
and our visitors from my family and yours  
may stay the night here  
and the storm will not change its course.  
The spiritual sheikh counts the fragments  
and the clutter outside.  
The doors  
the furniture  
the lights  
are pleading.  
Despite this,  
I peel you  
I strip you  
I light you  
against the glass of my dreams  
and the mirror.

## IMAGE

Their hairdos stretched out like a rooster's crest.  
Their garments tidy and starched.  
They were infatuated  
with the seas, the sky and the graves.  
We took a commemorative photo.

No pillow, rifle or green stick  
in the room.  
No snow guarding the doors;  
only faraway barking ...

I turn on the television  
clap hands for a flying ball  
support the losers  
turn off the television.

I smoke a field of tobacco,  
colour the silence  
for fear that my body,  
yearning for sleep,  
is fading away.  
My soul soars over their balconies.  
A tiny cloud of slumber shall not enter.  
Here is the table  
a whisky bottle

ten fingers  
and like a curving serpent,  
a Beethoven symphony.

Twelve o'clock on the dot  
a new millennium arrives:  
a century is gone.  
How do I glean the voices  
in their messages  
to move this silence?  
I disperse them away from my eye's sphere.  
Their snow falls on the dunes of my memory.

## TRACKING

I have no desire to follow anyone  
or go to any place, even an island  
where the waters became stones.  
I don't have any wish for anyone to follow me  
or think that no one is aware of me  
or seeing me.

This is the way.  
Every day he stops near the tree  
in a faraway spot.  
He extends his vision  
then continues his crossing ...  
I may see what suddenly  
made him cry and laugh.  
Because I am fond of tracking  
I gaze at the same spot  
so that I may reach it.  
I am still walking silently and panting.  
Was it necessary for me to look?  
It is just a chair: a bird ready for flight.  
On it, a curved branch like  
the eyebrows of a prisoner.  
As if the squares and triangles on the walls  
were obituaries posted by time.  
As if the air is withholding its touch.

Faces are passing  
taking the shapes of fists in every corner.  
The details are like threads preparing a way out.  
I have not run away, so I may see.  
I come freely.  
I come compelled.

The war promised its people paradise.  
Now it cheats them, glowing and smiling  
and so is the road.  
Eyes don't stop gazing  
as if they are the eyes of dolls  
fixed in one direction.  
Terrified eyes.  
I don't know how to assure them  
or where to hide them.  
As if they were followed by sharp screeching  
alternating between abandoned homes.

Faces blazing  
with the whiteness of the hair and temptations,  
carrying names, bridges and doors  
slammed by the wind,  
with laughter, dates and memories  
carried on horses roaming the plains.  
Faces dreaming of picking lemon and almond.  
Beautiful faces ... of truly foolish people.

From an unknown faraway place  
I hear wailing and avalanches.  
I hear the murmur of water pouring  
into the mine of desires.  
The tree at the entrance to the tavern  
looked as if it were keeping  
something from the patrons.  
On its leaves, I can see  
some of their dust  
and the drops of their tears.  
As if it were a pleasure to hear  
the song of the drunk,  
the clinking of their glasses, their chatter  
and to sway with their laughter.

The chair is as it has always been.  
The hole of life is tight.  
I search for a sky  
a means to escape the place chasing me.  
A thought occupies my mind:  
realizing that I would be absolutely lonely  
morning, noon, evening and night  
when the eyes open and peer at me.

Despair, hope, depression, joy, imagination,  
light, darkness, dryness, greenness,  
nearness, remoteness, death, life.  
I dream of touching corners

I was prevented from touching  
and reaching places  
I was prevented from reaching.  
The shore I have not seen,  
I am going to stretch on its sand.  
If only they don't close their shops and homes,  
their squares and pavements and cafés.  
If only I were  
the wolf-eyed sword-bearing clown.

The city no longer cares for  
the flabbergasted entering its hunger  
embracing mates when they leave  
they wave to them with their shoes.  
The dumbfounded will not find  
the city supporting his walk—  
even if he breathes  
flowers will not bloom.

I search for him  
for you all.  
Fire is in the rooms  
the Sun is on the hills  
shadows dodge the wall  
time is searching for space.  
In the villages, someone hangs his leg in the air  
leaving astonishment for the stones.  
Near these heaps of straw

I remember your things  
and I am drenched as if submerged in water.  
Your perfume awakens desires and fills the gut.  
I think of the one who  
emits madness and spreads fear,  
of myself, of those I know  
but I don't know how to talk about them.  
I am not the traitor who departed  
towing his desires behind him.  
I am not just a passer-by to glad tidings  
planting in the face looks  
that do not go to waste  
or break on water.  
I don't know the secrets of the feet  
that continued to search in a rainy night.  
I am happy to burn to give you light.  
Happy to spray this flame with snow,  
water, books, papers and pens  
and welcome you to take happiness  
to the dancing floor!

Whenever I try to draw you  
someone strikes me with an arrow.  
Until I reach, I don't pass time  
by nibbling at this pillow  
or by harvesting butterflies  
from the two banks of the river.

A long time has passed  
and I have been preoccupied by a thought:  
would I see him if I look behind me?  
Was anyone following me to start with?  
Has anyone seen me, or have I seen anyone?  
In the wake of this, my mouth dries,  
as though cotton is sprouting inside.  
Most likely, I don't see him  
or maybe I do without knowing  
he is the one I am following.

No, no, don't sing.  
Don't uproot this blackberry tree:  
some of its roots are still bleeding.  
It could be fruitful  
to continue my walk this dawn.  
I may not look lean  
if what I actually expect does not happen.

The chair is still empty.  
The sky has disappeared.  
I hear clatter ...  
It does not matter if someone arrives or not.  
I will continue my walk  
and on my way  
I will tailor an aba  
for silence  
and gasping.

**I SUSPECT  
THEY DIED THIRSTY**

The **47** Cities



I want some paper and a pen.

I am going to write a new chapter in love:

I face the world with naked eyes.

I work late surrounded by malice

with no repentance,

without which I cannot continue singing

and devouring the predators

closing in from every corner.

They offered a gun with a silencer to the malice

that used to provide me with bread and my desires

and said:

there is no life without killing the desires of

the child who exposed you

and preventing him from

spending hours in a dark cellar.

What does it matter to leave him alone?

Would his heart beat faster, or his eyes float

like two oysters on the waves?

Break your silence, break your fast.

Heart attacks and strokes are two spells

that do not know God.

And you have always thought

that you would meet Him:

the two of you casting your sight

over forests and rivers

and the bare-footed walking on spears.

You have always thought that you were

too ambiguous for women to read your details  
and distribute scraps among neighbours.  
Vendors, farmers, and good computer users  
decipher symbols with the ease of  
opening a cigarette pack.  
The rain is going to be heavy  
and the day is about to end.  
This night is treading on heavily for sure.  
The morning will break in and you open your eyes  
to the plates and utensils stacked in the sink.  
You will be besieged by the heaps of  
clothes and sheets expecting to be washed.  
You will be confounded by your concern  
about mixing the blue, navy blue, red  
and the demon's blood with white,  
yellow and light pink.  
It will be an unusual day!  
The sea and an elderly man  
promenading along the beach  
forever trying to start writing an endless tale.  
And your escape from the shadows  
of a woman and child following you.

Why do I now remember that room I rented  
on the ground floor of a building  
overlooking a hospital in Sydney?  
It was the only time I heard a knock on my door  
when a neighbour came to tell me

about young men smoking  
and injecting needles into their veins.  
I used to spend days alone inside.  
Others get together ...  
they overwhelm homes, halls, taverns and streets  
that do not sleep in their presence.  
For a time, I thought the door  
would disengage itself from its hinges  
rebellious against the wall  
banging against the floor  
to be cheered up by the sound  
of its own collision.  
I thought that the chairs,  
the table and the couches I bought from a family  
were estranged by the deep silence of the room.  
As if the furniture was begging  
to be returned or thrown away in the street.  
Silence.  
Emptiness.  
Surrender.  
The disabled man in the photo on the wall  
is my father.  
On his head and body I poured water  
when we prepared him for the grave.  
Drops leaked into his nose.  
A drop of blood seeped from his hand.  
The engine's rumbling comes from a distance  
and the ambulance siren croaks in the rainy night.

The wind moves the legs of perpetual intoxication  
like a scarecrow in a field, drawing with laughter  
the shape of its hallucinations.

You are not far away: you the lean lonely man.

Your colours retain their splendour.

But:

what can one who lives  
between the misgivings of two issues,  
two poisonous jaws, do?

The war is not over.

I want some paper and a pen.

I am trying to write in detail  
about creatures of flesh and blood.

I am trying to hunt some of their whispered words  
and some of their hums

before the night lands and the bats fly away  
soaring, descending, coming near your face,  
almost touching with their noses and eyes.

The morning is about to blow its trumpet.

Homes seem unusually closed.

The railings of the pearl-coloured balconies  
lean toward greenness.

And you:

when the rain stops you will go alone  
to what you don't love.

Things you fancied will be lost.

Don't compromise, don't take sides

on your way to your boredom.

The faces that used to scare you in your sleep,  
the voices you sent to investigate your nature,  
those coming in your name  
to rip to pieces the bodies of words,  
shed their blood.

They don't know that you are an inedible fruit,  
a mouth taught how to gesture,  
a tree that keeps a secret and knows its loggers.

Deserts of loneliness,  
the bitterness before the long departure,  
moments of slain childhood,  
frankincense of the cunning fortune teller  
and her masks burning in the soul  
are things sprouting in your life  
suddenly returning to you those  
who were masticated by exile.

This is your secret:

the one you know and they don't.

This is your melancholy, naïve ecstasies.

Shrouded, and you give them a banquet?

It could happen.

And you could stand on this rock facing the sea.

Your consolation is to tell what you have seen.

And you're thinking that you know  
the makeup and the constituents.

But no matter how long you look

at the burnt forest, you think  
it is going to become green.  
No matter how long you breathe in the dry fields,  
you think the flowers will bloom.

No pen, no paper.

Here:

isolation, density, presence, decline, exposure,  
murmur, god, apparition, evidence, iron, sight.

The slender fingertips that drew

a cat licking clotted blood

are the same ones that planted a rose

in a poor man's garden

and watered it until it became like a fruit.

We know that the rose gives roses every day,

but we don't know the fingertips and

how and where they disappeared.

The flowers of the hearts become fields.

The roots of jasmine and basil, their sap,

the green ones and the dry

sway with the recitation of magic

and the singing of farmers.

They sing the blueness of their days

start to delve in the morning

full with the dew of the dawn.

Capricious youth followed

dreams like cocoons.

The ancient walls and the eyes of

family, neighbours and friends  
stayed engraved in their heads.  
Even though they were dreaming  
of women lit by desires,  
they were arranging their years  
to plunge into the brink of  
the forbidden and the unknown.

Mother:  
the plains reveal the locust.  
Prayer is the memory of the soul.  
The scream is like an ember  
quickly becoming ashen.  
The sea is in front of me, and the two world wars  
have not annihilated the murder of crows.  
War crimes will not crush  
predators that flutter and assail.  
In remote villages, mythical birds  
used to shoot out of our voices.  
Our eyes had pastures where deer roamed  
and we ran behind them when they leaped.  
When we return home in the evening  
the deer might slumber in the wilderness  
but keep leaping in our heads as we sleep.

In the remote villages, we used to open  
our windows and doors, nostrils and chests  
for the darkness of the dawn

then leave our hands, mouths and noses  
at the neighbours' to pick, eat and smell  
almond, lemon and beans.  
We enjoyed a beauty unparalleled,  
except by the beauty of the senile.  
There we sang:  
spikes swayed, branches teetered  
and birds fell on us from the heart of the sky.

We were as pure as fools.  
Grown up,  
we were at the core of the mill.  
Conscious,  
we became like prematurely fruitful vines.  
We were carried over the necks  
of wounded beasts of prey,  
and the world was a tight lung.

Memories exit our blood: kisses, serpents  
and palms loaded with dates.  
The secret of tales is that  
they become more thrilling under moonlight  
or when storms go mad in the night.  
When the shadows intensify  
in the midday heat, seagulls migrate  
leaving their young tossed about by the waves.  
Despite and for this,  
I am going to learn love

and stunning stroke.

If I have more time, I will watch the sun  
combing its braids over the water.

Like a hermit atheist I will learn  
how to come out at night searching for  
the sick, the drunk, the lost and the errant.

I may at least chant for them  
lullabies they used to repeat  
about the sun approaching its last twilight  
and the rain that is going to be heavy tonight:

Oh coachman of life and soul!  
Drive my wounded leopards to their wilderness.

Only now I know how misled we were.  
We did not know that the dead we buried  
were not the same people.  
The dreams died, whilst the people were  
in other unknown places  
and we did not know what they were doing.  
Come, oh faces scorched by the sun,  
exile and the agonies of farewell!  
The centuries reincarnate: reborn to live in us  
in the presence of a miserable god.  
Like an everlasting river seeking the sea  
to drown deep inside it, then return to earth  
renewed like a wound.  
The rays of the sun,

the lightning of thunders  
dissolve and pass for our sake.  
They warm our bodies,  
return to us our shadows when we walk,  
our true friends, our support  
in boredom and discontent  
and times of loneliness  
in those wretched rooms in front of mirrors,  
on balconies, on walls, when opening doors,  
before entering homes, and closing,  
at the time of sleep when some sun or light rays  
are infiltrating our beds,  
when walking along meandering beaches,  
pavements and streets,  
the borders of vineyards and orchards,  
and when we go alone  
on the paths of endless confusion.

Here they are ...  
stagnant with their tradition  
awaiting a miracle!  
Yes, a miracle.  
Those who breed from assassins, prophets  
and the inventors of anaesthetics and alcohol.  
Descendants of emperors and conquerors,  
mountain climbers, whale and dragon hunters  
become worn rags in the presence of water.  
How do I cover up their revealing looks

like silver coming out of its hollows,  
floating on torrents?  
I think they are heading to ruin,  
to the moments waiting there like a chameleon,  
with all its splendour, colours and scents.  
It will farewell them and stretch out its tongue.  
Time is their leader, their curse  
never stops howling  
like lustful wolves in icy barren lands.  
No solace for them now,  
no longing or parting.

So is life:  
scattered on pavements,  
blown in the space of continents with no gravity.

So are the days:  
rising at every dawn with a rhythm  
like that of resignation decisions  
on the lips and in the minds of defeated leaders.  
Like emitting the smell of tin  
mixed with zinc water and verdigris.  
like seeing a chopped body,  
like echoes,  
like the last question asked by  
a man as slim as a skeleton:  
why would some be blamed for suicide?

The **60** Cities

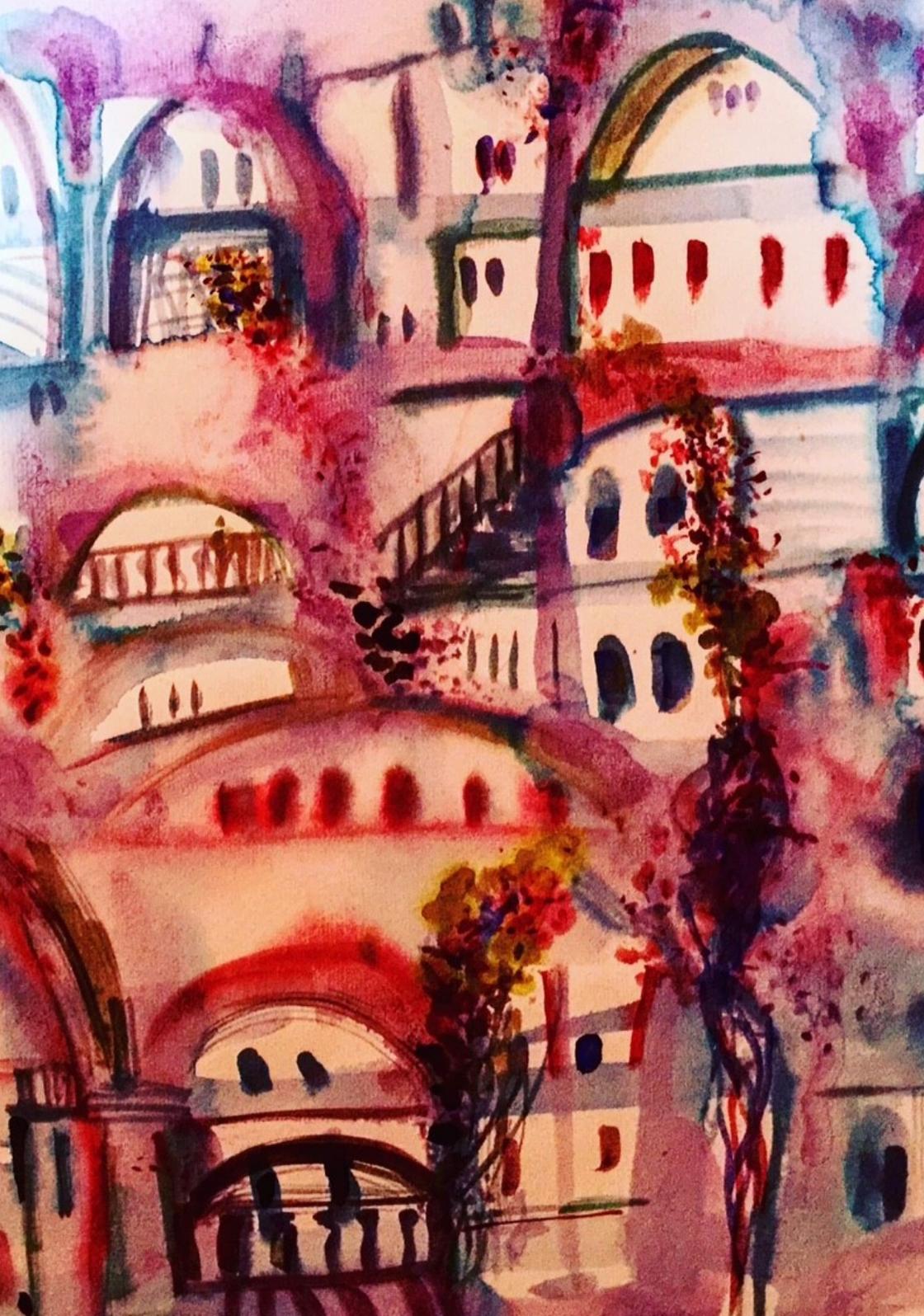
**THE MAGICIAN'S  
FOLDED SCARF**



## SO SLEEPS THE DEER

Standing in the gap,  
not knowing how to keep out  
not knowing how to come near.  
Time advances, lingers,  
does not advance, does not linger.  
All I remember is that I slept  
without fully closing my eyes.  
I woke up without fully opening them either.

‘So sleeps the deer,’ my mother says.  
As if I were not asleep or awake,  
not sleepless or slumberous.  
A feeling between caution and fear,  
concern and apprehension,  
indulgence and anxiety  
as if ants were crawling on my eyelashes.  
As if an old desire is splitting my life.  
As if my life cannot be lived  
except by turning a blind eye ...



## THE MAGICIAN MY FATHER

Cancer.

My lover's lungs

– the show must continue –

late, early, I don't know

but this coach is moving very slowly.

As if an earthquake were going to strike the place.

Yet, this morning does not seem unbearable:

two women seated facing each other and silent.

How can two women

keep silent when they meet?

A man hides his face with a piece of cloth

like the one photographers

used to slip their heads into.

Some passengers carry luggage, belongings,

cassette recorders and cameras.

Accents crash with the songs,

the driver's head,

the coach itself and a fly that

accompanied our journey.

Suddenly:

at the crossroads all disappear.

No one is left trembling inside

except me and the seats.

In front of my eyes, a branch swings

over the deserted church.

Late, early, I still don't know—  
but when is the time for launching  
the serpents hidden in the chest, biting the ribs?  
Between writing his will  
and scattering him in the air  
there is one bullet,  
or a pen and paper  
so he does not go mad or feel safe.  
So that he does not become a mobile crime,  
a tool for cheap commercials,  
promoting ideas as commodities,  
or writing about unskilled writers,  
in exchange for petty dollars  
that do not close a hole,  
deeper than the look of the destitute,  
in the blemish of life.  
So that he does not become a permanent lodger  
in police stations or sanitarium.  
The heart alone is the expanse of freedom  
and the space of soaring anger.

Late, early, this is not the aim.  
Some people were in the same place  
with their bodies exposed to passers-by.  
With delusions and fantasies they were drawing  
images of family and homes they never inhabited.  
The eyes are like broken traffic lights.  
Their whiteness is like silver

mixed with ash and embers.  
The street is shaded by stillness raining dreams.  
People spread on the pavements like rubber tyres.  
Life seems to be floating in an ocean,  
like the largest whale crossing  
with fugitives on its back.

Time lingers, time advances.  
I shall not close my mouth.  
I will go to court at the right time  
when crowds are coming in and out  
and in front of everyone at the tip of the spear  
of the balance that symbolizes justice,  
I will cough out all the seaweed in my chest,  
take legal action against whom it may concern:  
against God, for example.  
I shall never despair or give up.  
I want the price commensurate with  
articles I published in newspapers,  
a statue they erected in a place that was our home,  
a thief they beatified,  
a school they transformed into clubs and baths,  
those killed in front of me under the bridge  
over the River Death in Beirut.

They were passing by the bakery,  
calling the vegetable hawker.  
Suddenly:

I heard the cries of bodies pierced by bullets.  
I looked around:  
there was nothing, no one, only the walls swinging  
reflecting the shadows of faraway lights.  
I diminish the delusion of your presence ...  
No movies after today to make you wonder.  
No Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday  
suffocating in the middle of the week.  
No Sunday with no traffic in the morning.  
I used to think that people  
were born with every morning,  
but the ringing in the ears is an act  
not forgiven by boredom.  
Is loneliness there?  
Are there any doors that could  
assault the passers-by?  
Are there any passers-by?

Cigarette smoke became clouds behind you,  
and I could almost see my fear buried  
at the door of your familiarity.  
I knocked, but heard no echo.  
At last, I discovered that  
the house was without walls:  
only a door and a closed window  
hanging in space ...  
I presume you have become grass, trees or tables.  
Or maybe tiles on stairs.

Here?

Today

like every day ...

it is impossible to walk on the pavement

or on the opposite pavement,

in the street, or in the opposite one

for exercise or filling time

or – as they say – to vent what is in the chest.

Simply, walking for the sake of walking.

Impossible to walk at the top of the mountain,

on the edges, or at its foot.

Impossible to walk on the shore,

on the dividing line between

the beach and the land ...

The impossible is here.

I have thought a lot about changing district

or living in another village,

another city or another country

so I can befriend some being,

a human

an animal

a tree

a rock.

We may not eat or drink anything, or play.

We may never talk about anything.

I may look at any of them hoping to retrieve

the old features of my face before I was thirty.

I regain looks I lost amidst the roaring  
of planes in the sky of many journeys  
between el-Minieh and Australia.  
Hoping also to retrieve  
some of what I lost of my breath  
and contemplations at al-Andalus café in Tripoli,  
as I surrender to cigarette smoke forming a cloud  
on which I travel to a place with walls  
without the pictures of those who suicided.  
I search for the magician  
whose eyes are deeper than a well  
whose hands are lighter than a pinwheel.  
The magician who dissolved the city in a bottle,  
chopped off our neighbour's nose  
and tossed it to a black cat.  
I want the magician.  
I want no one but the magician.  
The remarkable cunning magician.  
The one who was able to smile for his admirers.  
But I wonder now:  
why wasn't he able to  
remove a donkey's mark off his forehead?  
He wasn't able to increase the strength of the bulb  
under its sparse rays, eleven children  
we used to gather.  
And you used to laugh ...  
Laugh like a slaughtered man, oh my father!

The magician who made me imagine  
that the gardens of coral and sponges  
were not full of dangerous curves and bends  
and that if the sea raged, it would be searching  
for a school of endangered fish.  
That my burning desires continue  
whilst you enjoy the gardens of your absence:  
temples and fornications roaring in you.  
That the core of the tightly locked door  
is shaking and will crack with one word.  
That the rain will not be late this year.

The magician who taught me,  
with the rope of childhood,  
how I fasten what is left and stare at my days,  
never to yearn for taverns  
or ask thereafter how others spend  
their mornings behind those hills.

More important than all of this:  
where is the magician?  
Do you really think that I will  
abandon my search for him?  
I must cross this rugged path,  
searching for the mysterious unknown;  
photograph the cracks, clear the head,  
befriend those who are asleep,  
step forward, enter the gap.

Here I am inside the gap.  
I don't know whether I am asleep,  
standing or reclining, sleepless or sleepy.  
I will scatter the words and the dreams  
and line the ceiling with my breath.  
Let a cloud laden with screams  
accumulate over the window glass.  
I must forget?  
I know ...  
But I must also remember the sobs of my car  
losing one part after the other.  
What could a man do  
who spends his days like a convict  
on an electric chair and not killed by shock  
or pardoned by his executioner?  
Really, I must not ask anyone  
to keep away or demolish these walls.  
None of you should come near,  
only the one most resilient can come.  
One dose after a long abstention  
is enough to light the world, to extinguish it too.  
Enough to plunge you into the full extent  
of what you love and what they don't.  
No one should fall at the edge of childhood,  
in the middle of the road, at its end,  
not in any time, not at any place.  
I know that the sun rises under the rain  
and I can see gypsies celebrating.

But I want the magician!  
I am still looking for the magician and I want him.  
The magician is looking for me and wants me too.  
I think he carried many arms  
under his arm and disappeared.  
And I will carry many arms  
under mine and disappear.  
He dreams of a space the size of his body only.  
And I dream of a space the size of my body only.  
A space securing the boundaries  
of his dance or his grave.  
The rasp could not remove  
the smell of cows from his hands.  
The scarf in the pocket of his wedding suit  
is still unfolded, as if it has just been placed there.

The **74** Cities

**GREEN UNDER  
LOCUST SWARMS**

*For Sara*



## A PAINTING THAT COULD BE OF A WOMAN, A MAN OR SOME BEING

The nail and the rooster?  
The nail and the rooster frozen  
inside the fridge, of course,  
and the walls and the cold bodies,  
the waiters, the evening, the silence,  
and the noise  
nothing moved or replied,  
not even the cat which never stops meowing:  
'Good evening,' I said.

I try to look at my face, even for a moment:  
things are changing,  
the moments sound like  
a road roller in the summer of a poor village.  
The solitary cat retires on sheepskin.  
The skin changes, and so does the sheep.  
Tears, loyalty, loneliness, telepathy,  
only the living remains alive ...  
The table is black  
yearning sprouts from asphalt  
and on the sides of the streets  
it gazes, reproaches.

Something else—  
wonderment, contemplation, fear or the  
clandestine friend of solitude  
in faraway lands.

The mirror on the bedroom dressing table  
overflows with the photos of those who thought  
that you were a worker hammering  
a spike in the wall, the hammer,  
the spike or the wall.

The mad dog does not charge,  
the drunk does not swear,  
there is no bandit, no carriage,  
no beast to run you over.

No woman you deceived,  
no woman you presented with  
the two beads of your eyes  
and the rarest sparrows of your mouth.

A woman you don't love, or hate ...

A woman who reminds you of the past,  
who does not remind you of the past,  
or of what is going to pass,  
no woman, no ambulance carrying a corpse  
and I waited alone in a night in January  
under an old staircase.

I saluted those sitting in the shop  
and they did not return my greetings.

It is always like this:  
Is love camouflaged quicksilver?  
I may not know.  
Let us suppose it is,  
like a broken electrical iron cutter  
hauled by a donkey,  
in one press of a button  
it abducts millions of hungry people!  
A man I know looks like an old mule  
tended by a mean coachman,  
not wanting to exhaust it.  
A man carried atop a spear,  
on the whiteness of chemical compounds,  
facing a portrait of a woman having a drink,  
smoking, extinguishing her cigarettes in a mouth!  
A portrait, I think of a man most probably  
asking for a drink of water.  
A drink of water?  
Maybe, I don't know.  
A portrait of a being, I believe, trying to silence  
beings, as if they were wolves inside his throat,  
and gather his fragmented parts:  
in one word, the lofty building collapses?

Wrong to think that it is possible to say:  
among children's toys, the joy of henna  
and the mirth of fountains  
that the long village winter passes,

without a body on its flesh I find my warmth,  
uncover to see my light.

I know what pierces the gut.  
The drill does not hurt until it reaches the marrow  
or maybe not.

Some believe that the hammer  
does not hurt the nail,  
the throat does not break like glass,  
slaughtering a rooster and laying it in the fridge  
prevents it from crowing  
and that boiling oil burns basil and mint gardens  
more than depriving them of water.

I think they don't know:  
on the twentieth of June,  
in the year one thousand nine hundred  
and lousiest of years,<sup>1</sup>  
the most cursed of them all  
entered, still fighting  
to reclaim the fledglings from the claws,  
the nail from the wall,  
even if the rooster filled the region with crowing.

---

<sup>1</sup> The birth year of the poet.

## HIS EYES

The nail, the rooster and, of course, his eyes  
remain pursuing the doors  
until they take themselves off the walls.  
Emails and snail mail arrive.  
The mafias and the militias spread.  
Rooms blaze with light  
and the bodies take the shape of number 69.  
His eyes are like orphanages, schools, churches,  
hospitals, mosques, holy books and  
taverns for selling narcotics.

His eyes: a marquee for mobile funeral services.  
His smiles are traps drawn in the air,  
tied by shoelaces, hanging from mulberry trees  
where birds are forced to take shelter and sleep.  
His eyes are toasting drinks:  
the glasses are skulls,  
wrists and children's fingertips.  
The eyebrows are umbrellas to shade everyone.  
But my shoes and attire were not suitable.

One day, I shall learn how to fly airplanes  
to strike the trees of malice in his eyes,  
skyscrapers, towers and trade centres:  
one hit is enough!

Only then would the desert be planted  
with smiles, water, flowers and children  
by the arms of villagers,  
as if almost dislocated from the shoulders,  
stretched like tortoise shells  
to gouge out his eyes.

## WHEELS

Dancing, circus, acrobatics:  
infatuation with feet disfiguring the face of war.  
Ahmad Alhussein,<sup>2</sup> the dancing artist  
who became a tinsmith, and the devil  
drew with their feet the most scented breath,  
the most compassionate looks  
and the most radiant bodies—  
trees resistant to bending or felling.  
In one corner of the world  
I saw the devil crying.  
He danced with him and tempted him.  
As if arms, legs and eyes sprouted on him  
and the energy of a bull ...  
as if he hauled the rocks of his family's morning  
and raised the trunks of trees from its dry life.  
A dance: a dart to become a tinsmith  
climbing the stage from behind  
piercing the fourth wall—the audience.

A few or many – it does not matter – know  
that bread is more everlasting and radiant  
than a painting by van Gogh  
or the face of Marilyn Monroe.

---

<sup>2</sup> A very skilled dancing artist who used to perform on the streets of Tripoli, Lebanon. He worked as a tinsmith to survive.

But I know what Ahmad says  
of a bunch of wheat spikes  
whose field is his eyes ...  
the girl's school apron  
her colouring pens  
the money spent on treating his wife  
actors and actresses who failed  
even to have a stage on the sides of the roads.  
The tavern and plumbing were  
at a distance of two steps and two looks.  
Two caves, in the lesser of which  
life becomes black and the blackness of the eyes  
becomes white, along with the hair on the head.

Ahmad Alhussein:  
his teeth fell out  
the night the Soviet Union collapsed.  
His head, with all its holes and cracks,  
resembled a pair of shoes with loose laces  
for a thief confronted by the owners:  
one shoe in the sink,  
the other under a dripping tap ...  
The M16 bullet was too weak  
to penetrate his temples.

His forehead did not cave in  
under the kick of a mule ...  
His eyes have never returned to their sockets

since the booby-trap of  
the vegetable market in Tripoli.  
The years: rolling wheels.  
The players are:  
diabetes, triglycerides and some senility.

At one corner of the café,  
on the pavement:  
a bearded man dances  
and some young people  
laugh and applaud.



## NOT TO MY LIKING

I wash the aspirations of the world  
with swarms of dysfunctional yearnings,  
the froth of beer,  
tears and the water of hope.  
My eyes open not to my liking  
I wear my clothes inside out.  
The phone rings  
I rush to open the door.  
Like a child leading his father:  
reading the newspapers in the morning  
the black words  
the cup of black coffee  
the extracts of the soul of those  
whose hair has turned white  
and their hopes and eyes as well.  
These breezes:  
plowing the nostrils, bronchi and chest.

I try to laugh for a sun going around the earth  
or an earth orbiting the sun  
or a sun that does not go around the earth  
or an earth that does not orbit the sun  
or for no sun  
and no earth.  
For children I promised to take

to see a Hitchcock movie—  
not to my liking, of course.

Sleepiness is like surges of narcotic doses.  
Tonight, a hurricane will strike the north  
according to the broadcaster, of course.  
The cognac has run out completely.  
This painting is more ambiguous  
than a suicided stranger.  
Its lines and colours are sharper  
than a blade used to slash arteries.  
This shabby timber table,  
heavier than Al-Rouché Rock,  
is more ancient and beautiful.  
This house, haunted by ghosts  
and the pictures of migrants and the dead,  
is safer and less frightening than Burj Elmurr.<sup>3</sup>

You know exactly what  
one after midnight means  
in a village, city and a spot  
where the living are akin to the dead.

One after midnight, in the direction of the bed,  
nightmares line up in troops—  
the journey is starting: not to my liking.

---

<sup>3</sup> A renowned skyscraper, built in a modest suburb of Beirut, Lebanon. It is still uninhabited due to an inheritance dispute.

## THE WALL

My eyes cannot sound its height  
nor its beginning or end.  
I cannot jump over it, but I touch it  
and strike its breadth with my fist.  
They advised me to protect myself with it.  
All right:  
Do I stand behind it, or in front?  
It does not matter,  
as long as I am convinced it will fall.

Yes, it could fall.  
Is there anyone who can ensure  
that it would not?

I prepare myself for a meeting  
that most probably wouldn't take place.  
I expect to be hit by a truck, electric shock  
or a bite of a mad dog.  
Most likely, a bitch.  
It may happen.  
Is there anyone who can ensure  
that this will not happen?  
It may happen on my way back  
from half-way of the path of whiteness  
and collecting the looks of a girl child

drawing a home with a girl and her mother  
in a field of fire and aggression.  
This could happen at the same instant  
I am daily weaving the garment of love  
for people, I knew later,  
who only bathe seasonally.  
I weave a woollen garment with lost full stops,  
punctuation and question marks  
every one revoking the other.  
The love garment is akin to the woollen garment.  
Two lit garments entertaining silence  
and two hands engraved with veins,  
cold and wakefulness.  
The torn wool of loneliness  
frightened by the sound of  
sneaky needles marrying to produce  
a glove, beanie, shawl, jumper and a sock  
for a child, husband or brother.  
Wool that reminds us of the mother  
when she tailors the garment of sorrows.  
I weave for them faces they lost  
and scalps plump like walnuts  
and the bundles carried by villagers  
descending to the city.  
Heads with hair combed like pony tails,  
with unkempt hair like  
calico or even thistle.  
Heads:

lie now on the beds of cosmetic surgery  
like rags spread on washing lines.  
With bodies stretched and swollen  
serenaded by the sounds of cymbals,  
ouds, violins and tambourines—  
they dance!

Heads:

Under the umbrellas, they were befriended  
by the sun and accompanied by rain.

They walked with solid steps  
with breath strong enough  
to change the course of ships.

Now with breath that cannot  
move a cigarette paper.

To stop from tumbling,  
they clutch their arteries,  
eyes almost falling from their sockets.

They stop with every step  
so they don't trip on the furrows of thoughts  
that yielded remorse and killers.

Yielded exhibition halls, massage parlours,  
steam baths, shops, glass walls, arms dealers,  
dealers of sugar, wheat, baby milk, medicines,  
artificial organs, toxic waste and  
polished high walls: even if they were going  
to roll over the heads like floors  
of wormy grains not pecked by birds  
not winnowed by threshing machines.



## GREEN UNDER LOCUST SWARMS

... The dust was there too,  
provisions for the disabled  
and a life that began with partings.  
I don't know what to tell you.  
Why were you not a wood-chopper,  
an owner of a bulldozer,  
peasant, gravedigger or an interpreter of dreams?

The trees are poisonous  
the land looks like a turtle shield  
the buildings like cracked casks  
the nightmares, oh the nightmares:  
braided chains no one can explain!

The axe, the pick, the bulldozer's blade  
and reading the supernatural:  
for cutting, demolishing, digging and relaxation.  
Whenever a tree is cut, you will surely remember  
the massacres of the forests of hope.  
Whenever a building is demolished  
a vast wasteland appears in the soul.  
Whenever a wasteland is planted,  
the earth appears less alien.  
Whenever a well is drilled, the water gushes out  
and the graves appear less dark and petrifying.

Whenever the reason is known  
the chains feel looser  
and you surely remember  
the room, the flower and the pillow.  
A room you thought was a mine  
and the mature wine there,  
placed among heaps of straw:  
the sap of villagers who bled their dreams.

The questions never end—  
writing letters does not protect against collapse.  
Anxiety, silence, monotony, diversity:  
myths believed by a few, or maybe many,  
I don't know.  
Dialogue in crowded places is a scandal that  
cannot be ended by a tragedy, or it can.  
Preparing food, arranging the bed,  
taking care of flower pots:  
silence hoarding screaming and dancing,  
or maybe not.  
Sympathising with side streets few people use,  
shops and restaurants with few patrons,  
yearning for pavements,  
standing on a mountain summit,  
waving to cities and villages nearby,  
and faraway countries:  
affairs that can only be gotten rid of  
by a big crime, or maybe not.

They move him from the wet places  
to the sun and fresh air  
as if he were a traitor, disabled and his colour  
leans towards the yellowish white.  
Just like Lebanon.  
You surely understand what I mean.  
Like an eye that could see  
at the last moment of its life  
and suddenly closed  
then many hands rushed to open it.  
It is the temporal entrusted with the secret.  
It is a bat that disappeared in the night.  
It is a dot that left no mark on any line.  
It is space, brilliance, gravity  
and the burner of utopias.  
Only an eye is going to name the killers,  
describe the stolen compass,  
enlarge its lovers and envious ones  
by millions of light years.  
For it, with it and in it,  
splendour and speech manifest themselves  
and the universe contracts  
or maybe not.

Here is the oud, the violin,  
the tambourine and jazz music.  
Have you forgotten the jazz?

Blow:

the exhaling is merely carbon dioxide  
and the smell of your inside roasting—  
spoiled types.

Play your oud

the music is your soldiers  
detained in the oven of your heart.

Your mad fingertips save them  
before the moment of outbreak and breakdown.

The rain:

salt water, oxygen and viruses live high above,  
never mind that they are the harbingers of  
the birth of the witness who  
no one has seen, or ever will.

This is if you want, of course.

I think that the owl is wise tonight  
announcing the death of its victims.  
And you, don't you think so?

The homes, the atrocities, the calamities,  
the joy masturbating its life  
and ecstasies without astonishment.

It falls into fits of laughter.

I try not to end a crisis by crises. And you?

I remain in my old perversity: no, no, no.

The main reason for my permanent dwelling  
in the sea of eternity

is the sea of seductions and dreams.  
The 'no' is the male ever erect  
on the tips of pens, on paper  
and in the face of the world.

Take it easy ...  
I think it is fair to say  
'No' to the above three no's.  
There are things worth keeping in oysters  
some voices in the marrow  
some images in the ligaments  
and cracks and saltiness  
and you?

Justice?  
Damnation is the revival.  
Destruction is the aim.  
The donkey is the only creature  
I spent years insisting on my father to possess.  
And you?

Don't stand out, don't be enlightened, don't be  
clear, don't be sad, don't come together, don't  
dissipate, don't disappear, don't expand, don't  
stray, don't be straight, don't hide, don't appear,  
don't burn, don't become ice ...  
All of this, if you want, of course!

Be the horror tiger of questions  
Be the horror  
Be the questions  
Be the whale of its torrential yearning  
Be the yearning  
Be the torrential  
Be the disengagement  
Be the braiding  
Be the devotion  
Be the disengaged  
Be the disengagement  
Be the ambition  
Be the contentment  
Be the dullness  
Be the laziness.  
All of this if you want, of course.  
But don't be the sentiment  
or be, if so you want, of course.  
Don't burn, don't anticipate, don't explode  
if you want, of course!  
Or shall I tell you?  
Explode, but remember if you can, of course:  
the bleak ringing will continue,  
the rodents shall multiply,  
and you are alone  
under the locust swarms.

## THE RHYTHM OF BREATHS

Searching for an idea  
or fulfilling a wish  
is like your feeling on a rainy night  
you spent banished to a public park in Sydney.  
The idea: a wish that the exiled return,  
that the dead return to visit you  
in your dream again.  
As if you return to see  
the drums, carried on the donkey's back,  
rapped as in funerals in olden times:  
the consolors arrive ...  
and that dangling black thing  
we used to laugh and think it was a stick  
for beating the drums:  
the donkey's penis!

The wish, Basheer<sup>4</sup> says,  
when you dream of taking  
the children skating, on ice or on stone,  
the two children become two unknown dots  
in a black continent.  
As if the bleeding from Mona's leg  
is an abstract painting on  
the revolving snow stone.

---

<sup>4</sup> The poet's nephew. Mona is the poet's niece.

Basheer's forever-stretched hands,  
like the shoulders of an old balance,  
or the wings of a bird I saw once in my life,  
are attempts to maintain balance,  
at home, at school, in the street,  
so the family's ship, sailing from  
Tripoli to Cyprus to Sydney, does not drown.

The donkey disappeared, along  
with its tearful eyes, and the drums too.  
We no longer laugh.  
For us the phallus was more splendid  
than the microphone.

The wish suddenly leaps,  
hollowing the head:  
what is the difference between  
a genuine child shaded by  
white praying garments  
under which monkeys masturbate,  
pigs copulate,  
and a foundling dreaming of the hand  
of a mother wiping his forehead?  
Whilst the mother undresses  
to the rhythm of music and diffusion of perfume;  
Opium, Chanel, Paris ...  
she passes her fingertips over  
her legs, thighs, pubes, breasts

swaying to the rhythm of the child's breath  
in the same room.

The same room dwells in his self.

The child is the breaths of rhythm.

A decisive rhythm!

Lust:

paintings by surrealists

an ostrich

just like asking about the difference

between a head in the sand

and a bottom in the air.

A mother kicks a child's breakfast.

She says, 'You're late for school.'

I say, 'You're late for your lover.'

Lust is like the difference

between madness and laughter.

Between a body they slaughtered,

mutilated and drowned in colours

and a body you used to protect jealously

from the touch of the paintbrush.

Dismembering and mutilations are known.

The unknown is the way, the love.

Love:

is the way, the unknown.

Honesty needs a dog, of course.  
The days, the seasons, need trees that uncover  
a sky that smokes  
and a woman that uncovers too.

The spring, for example,  
needs blossoms, sparrows, bees and butterflies.  
Needs rain, sun and children.  
Life needs a rascal and a donkey too.  
And a look resembling  
the colour of my mother's eyes  
since the passing away of my brother  
who painted his delirium and absence  
with laughter.  
It needs that black desire to search for an idea  
and expectations I dream to fulfil.  
It needs the burning of the wick  
of perpetual feeling on a rainy night  
I spent banished to a public park in Sydney.

# THE CITIES



2013  
SILVANE

# THE CITIES

*For Tripoli, Lebanon*

Difficult to deny or accept the cities we love.  
Hard to stand at their walls like failed conquerors.  
We are used to coexisting with cities  
we abandon - or they abandon us -  
to which we forcibly return.  
We are used to living with them  
to enjoying their boredom.  
We are tamed to love denial,  
recognition and acceptance,  
banishment and obscurity.  
The cities we love sweep us away,  
melt us, provide for us  
and they tie us with loose ropes  
to make us feel we own them.  
But as soon as we near their fruits  
they unfold their transparent  
impenetrable scarf in our faces.

The cities are more attractive than  
all the women by whom I have been smitten.  
The cities urge us to remain in them,  
but also to refuse, rebel in their face and leave.

At the same time, they urge us to obey,  
submit and accept their current images.  
They simultaneously ask us for  
wordiness and conciseness.

The cities we love have terms  
we cannot meet except with  
disobedience, rebellion and revolution.  
The cities we love have the eyes of eagles,  
the eyes of falcons with conditions of  
love, forbearance and compulsion.  
The difference here is simple and complicated  
confirmed by the mind and denied by emotion.  
Cities are like books  
expressing the dreams of their authors,  
the dreams of their inhabitants.  
The cities are the primordial elements,  
formative of their inhabitants  
as if they were a piece of milky white calico  
embellishing them, but they  
fray it, destroy it like any scrap,  
like any tight shoes torn all around.  
Some inhabitants are the genuine deserving ones  
and others, the foundlings, neither find many  
who dare claim their parenthood  
nor many who disown them.  
The foundlings, as well as the real ones:  
the mother alone can claim or disown.

She, alone, is the unwilling witness,  
the raped, the weeping and sad.  
She alone is the pure, the holy.  
We love the cities where  
we were born and raised,  
even if we left them,  
even if they extinguished their streets, libraries,  
squares, lanes and the lights of their old homes.  
Their stones, terraces, homes, cafés, cinemas  
remain imprinted in them, erupting in our heads.  
With them, we adorn all the cities we then meet.

It is not important to dwell in the cities we love.  
What is important is that they leave in us  
caravans and flocks of feelings,  
that we are their children.  
They embrace us if we stay away from them,  
protect us where there is no other shelter,  
even though they might not be able  
to embrace or shelter.  
Those who dwell in the hearts,  
eyes, heads and extremities of the cities  
are the strangers, the homeless,  
the displaced and the expelled.  
The inhabitants of the hearts of the mother cities  
are their bedfellows and the cities are their lovers.  
They are the traitors, the killers and  
the eye-gougers.

The children of the cities who have not left,  
the children who departed,  
the lodgers, the disengaged and the committed  
are just the same as the extortionists or the donors  
even if they borrow faces to mask their defects:  
they will one day confront them  
and they will name them one by one,  
they will not leave them without honourable faces,  
for they cannot see them subservient, deformed.  
I never mention talk, poetry, critique or sociology  
without the cities being in control of  
my consciousness and subconscious.  
In control of variety, intertwinement,  
deep-rootedness and diversity.  
They present themselves with their  
complete splendour,  
the scent of their lemon flowers,  
the kindness of their people,  
the charm of their seduction  
and their stretched hands:  
never tiring, never shrinking, always blossoming.  
The blaze of passion, love, friendship, writing, and  
the love of difference, contradiction, concord and  
opposition never dwindling.

The cities can be jealous too.  
Yes, the cities can be as jealous as mothers.  
The cities have faces and faces.

The cities exercise displeasure,  
acceptance, rejection and anger.  
The cities stand before their sons and daughters  
like gentle, guilty children  
standing before a strict mother.  
The cities apologise to their sons and daughters  
who also apologise.  
By their apology, the cities may lower or raise  
their northern, western, eastern and  
southern gates.  
The disgruntled stand on their pavements,  
in their restaurants, cafes, cinemas, studios,  
old libraries with scents stuck to the marrow  
and lungs like a sparrow suddenly confronted  
with wind and torrential rain.  
Yes, the cities feel jealous like lovers.  
It is in the temperament of lovers to blaze,  
burn and explode too.  
It is possible for a lover who is blazing,  
burning and exploding  
to deny, stab or kill.  
If some start a fire,  
the cities will not start any fire with them,  
they will not be part of the action,  
they will not deny, stab or kill with the killers.  
Neither the foundling nor the wellborn,  
no matter what they do or  
how many faces they muster,

are able to make the cities like chameleons.

The cities do not vomit us  
even if we were their fatal fever,  
boiling inside their entrails and convolutions.  
Even if we snub the cities,  
they will not discount us.  
If we trade in them, they will not trade in us.  
If we punish them with ingratitude,  
they will not be ungrateful.  
If we give them their due and forget,  
they will never forget.  
They suffer, weep, restrain,  
but they will write and publish.  
They might be prevented from reaching their goal,  
but no one can take them off the racetracks.  
They will duly give, and punish the corrupt.  
The cities goad us to love life  
and walk in the paths of their lovers,  
lovers of life, makers of dreams, makers of cities.  
City traders encourage asceticism and reclusion,  
for us to view the cities  
as whores able to be chaste.  
They do not know that the cities  
will stay in our eyes the whores  
with bubbling youth, desirable and flirtatious.  
They goad us to love the afterlife,  
seducing us with eternity.

Is there anything more eternal  
than to be consumed by the love of the cities?  
Is there anything more eternal  
than the servant of God, who is seeking  
the refinement of qualities, who remains a  
troublemaker carrying the broom  
against the hurricanes of life  
to be nearest to The Creator?  
Oh lover, traitor, loyal, friend, wild, peaceful,  
embracing, warm, cold, coerced, raped, subdued,  
happy, tainted, immaculate, sacred whore:  
I leave, for your absence, its presence  
propagating in my breaths  
and go determined to arrange my space.  
I imagine that my room has a terrace,  
that travellers passing by will turn their heads  
towards me, look at me and smile.  
I leave for your absence vast plots of loyalty,  
disownment and human corpses  
so that you mutilate them in revenge  
because you are the unwilling witness to silence  
when they were eating  
the eyes and fingers of children:  
I saw them with my own eyes  
sharing their birthday and Christmas presents.  
I leave, for your absence, writings and fragments  
sprouting on some margins of my thinking  
where algae fall and no matter how much

the sun heats up, and the desert winds blow  
they will not induce fear in your presence.  
I leave for your absence that you describe them  
using conjunctions, articles and similes  
and talk about fish grown in ponds with waters  
mixed with crossbred elements.  
Fish with flashing scales and glittering eyes,  
as soon as their bones toughen  
they escape, cursing the water,  
the trees that shaded them  
and the hands that were extended to them  
throwing bread crumbs and the grains of life  
in times of hunger and boring middays.

I leave it for your absence to describe  
how the earth slips from beneath you  
as you prepare it and its people  
for a journey outside the orbit.  
Talk about something, things, a name, names,  
a story-teller, story-tellers, those who remember,  
those who forget, the remorseful, the languid  
and those brimful of optimism.  
This is how you seem to them  
when you move away a little,  
this is how they seem to you when  
they move away:  
spoiled, like a heap of rotten food.  
Time slips through your hands, passes

like a beast over the bulbuls of thought.  
When you take the decision of deporting them:  
don't you let them take something with them,  
not even their shoes?  
A necessity of departure is that the departing  
take their shoes with them.  
At least, where there is no tree, no wall  
or a being to shade or protect them,  
they could put the shoes under their heads  
or near their shoulders, so they could smell  
the scent of places they visited:  
the scent of the earth.  
Heirs are the savages that do not die out:  
they mutilate the departing,  
even rob them of their shoes.  
The living have everything, but not satisfied.  
The dead have nothing, but satisfied.  
I leave for your absence that you enjoy  
the qualities of a legendary child  
you were unable to defeat.  
The most I love about you:  
the girl, the woman, the teacher, the saint,  
the whore, the flirtatious one drowned  
in her milky whiteness,  
the female behaving like a chameleon,  
brimming with ripeness, wearing the garments of  
flirtation and adolescent hypocrisy.

I leave for your absence to become a moon,  
narcissus and lemon trees  
never to dry out  
in the mind of ever-blazing youth.

I leave for your absence that it lives  
a perpetual spring in the presence of the man  
who has fenced himself like a hedgehog  
in some unknown abyss.

I leave for your absence a virgin memory  
recalling and reviving things brimming  
with obscenities unmitigated  
by the atrocities of war.

I leave for your absence that you scrape  
the dust off worn photos, or those eaten  
or served as food for ignorance, for fire,  
no matter how vivid their colours and scents are.

I leave for your absence that you recall  
the imagination  
the expressions  
the symbols  
the inspirations.

Simple language, tools and elements  
engage in continuous wars undermining the spirit,  
flocks of fugitives on the pavements of exiles  
and lines of innocent people.

Lines battered by the hands of

horror movie directors, where  
the heroes become consumed old publicity,  
where spiritless things and those spirited  
are mere business, mere traps, mere soft snow:  
institutions without proprietors  
public property without owners  
without protection or guarding.

The water of wars burns,  
the children of wars are only quenched  
inside shooting fields and oceans of ambush.

I leave for your absence to recall and destroy  
the pawned hammers that hatched  
inside the lavatories of the politicians' imagination  
propagated by the media and publishing houses.  
Hammers are materials without souls or hearts.  
They have the eyes of a falcon,  
hoping to transform diamonds into cadavers.  
The hunters, their masters,  
leave the leftovers for them  
and at the end of the journey  
they shoot them in the head.

The hammers:  
are tools of power, no one can criticise.  
They live on the blood of genuine intellectuals.  
Tools in disguise justifying

the permanent rule of criminals.  
Pathetic, weak, frail texts are creatures  
born once never to return  
just like flowing waters  
deserving unconditional care.

The texts:  
people and generations of approaches,  
relationships, wishes and progress of time.

The texts:  
widening the scope, the vision  
and the dreams over time.  
Reclaiming relationships,  
debates and disrobing  
notables forced to reside in  
the established lobby of peace  
in the climate of continuous cold war.  
Fangs and claws inserted in the limbs.  
Marginalisation transforming, distorting,  
dislocating, keeping the prey alive:  
continually bleeding.  
A frail text woven from cracks  
not following methods and technologies  
to treat the body of the city: the poem.  
Not following stages, schools, generations,  
segments and proofs.

The texts:  
degrees of expression that go beyond  
logic, metre and blasphemy.  
Outside imitating the pioneers and the sculptors.  
Beyond surrealism, symbolism, deconstructionism,  
aesthetic, romantic and other schools.

The texts:  
bearded passers-by, wearing the cap of invisibility,  
I walk behind them finding my way.  
They pass indifferently  
not feeling my presence.  
I rejoice and smile whenever  
they step on my shadow.

Where do the cities lead us,  
the unfamiliar texts?  
Where would the expired go  
when he stands inhabited with curses,  
when all his controlling springs malfunction  
at the sight of humans dragged by tanks?  
Is obscenity different from  
politeness and amiability in the presence of  
the authorities of culture, church and politics?  
Are the vivid classifications of the injustice  
harbouring all contradictions not a way  
to express superfluous methods of suppression  
painted unblemished black by the authorities?

Is the curse of the intellectual poet different from  
his curse of those who curse him?  
Is it other than his unceasing burning  
of the embers of his longing for the land  
for the people who were pushed away  
in the deserts of loss  
in the paths and tunnels of perpetual exile:  
exile inside and outside the land?  
Poets and intellectuals know that  
there is no real difference  
'between a person dying leading an army  
and one defecating among ruins'  
as Al-Maghout once said.

I leave you to say the more important word,  
the more lasting,  
the one inclusive of all times and places.

Peace, war, revolution, submission, hate, love.  
A word in the name of God or Satan.  
In the name of men dignified, respected,  
brimming with health, splendour and vigour.  
In the name of the wretches,  
those expelled from the heavens,  
the tormented sick, the mutilated and dissidents:  
imprisoned, exiled, burnt,  
but who refuse to become ashes.  
If they scatter, they transform

to other beings we inhale  
through the air, water, food and the elements.  
I leave it to you to talk about the ways  
predators and pimps lurk.

I leave it to you that you be the cities, all the cities  
with no gates, no boundaries, no walls,  
no flapping flags, no names,  
and let the lights shine, the air whistle,  
the music play, the secluded women come out  
with their full breasts, captivating eyes,  
compact thighs like the columns of firm buildings,  
telling us:

We are the creation, the images,  
the flasks burning with wine, lights and perfume.  
We are the movies, the singing, the acting,  
the earth, the love, the enjoyment, the tenderness,  
the beauty, the lilies, the jasmine.  
We are the cheap women, the forbidden,  
the whores, the chaste, the apples,  
the trees of seduction.  
Rocks split between our thighs  
where the semen of desire and joy  
rises to our paradise  
from the waters of life.



## COMMENTS BY AUSTRALIAN POET DR LOUISE WAKELING

Ghassan Alameddine's *The Cities* is a strong work spanning two decades. These poems, in their task of "opening the skull of time" ("Lost"), explore individual and collective responses to loss, alienation and the destructive impact of conflict. The last four sections, where purpose, manner and content are powerfully integrated, are especially strong. Alameddine's tendency overall is to write poetry that is succinct and challenging, highly imaginative, symbolic and deeply introspective. This is a visionary, sometimes surreal, style of writing which urges us to actively engage in making meaning, however difficult.

Recurring imagery relating to urban life is used effectively as a structuring principle in the work, with its persistent sense that "cities shift boundaries" ("Light Tremor"), and that wars erase lives, memories, parameters, and any unified sense of place. Equally, human identity is vulnerable, and can become lost and displaced, a situation continuing today since "two world wars/ have not annihilated the murder of crows." Sometimes, however, the city can become a desired goal, a place which may be as welcoming as nature, as in "Tracking": "The shore I have not seen,/ I am going to stretch on its sand./ If only they don't close their shops and homes/, their squares and pavements and cafés."

In the section, "My Father the Magician", the persona divides his existence between past and present, calling up memories of his father and of horrific acts such as the sight of "those killed in front of me under the bridge over the River Death". He is determined to speak out, to pursue

justice against unnamed foes, to bear witness to such atrocities. But somewhere in his divided existence, symbolised in the return to the homeland from Australia, he hopes to rediscover something of his old self: “I regain looks I lost amidst the roaring/of planes in the sky of many journeys/between el-Minieh and Australia.”

There are obvious risks involved when the poet aims to reach out to a diverse audience across language and cultural barriers – the enigmatic and oblique can easily tip over into the generic, or the merely obscure and perplexing. Consequently, there is some unevenness in the collection, notably in the initial sequence, “A Thread of Whiteness”. Here the style is at times frustratingly cryptic, but the collection does noticeably gather strength as it goes along. Greater clarity of purpose and subject matter in the earlier sequence, and a less generic treatment of suffering, would have engaged the reader more dynamically in the situations explored. While we can appreciate that the experience of tragedy and suffering is universal, and can relate to it on a human level, for readers to fully understand the impact of the forces and specific traumatic events involved in the sub-text, a number of poems require a subtle infusion of more specific social, geo-political and historical contexts.

The poet’s vision of life as the collision of fragility and beauty with the reality principle is beautifully expressed in the title of the second section, “When a Flutter of Butterflies Struck the Window Glass”. The quest takes on more urgency in “A Day”, where the person tries to “catch the fish/floating in my head/ all night”, paradoxically attempting to capture in words what he wants to escape from: the anxieties, truths, and ghosts that begin to press in on his world. The persona’s own sense of identity is

seen as fragmented by the magnitude of loss and suffering he is contemplating, both his own and that of others. In “Asleep”, for example, the surreal imagery emphasises the unbearable burden of this testimony crowding in on him: “Your hollow chest/cannot contain this crowd of the naked.” Like T. S. Eliot’s Prufrock, his identity seems to be under constant revision as he embarks on a quest to find answers to questions which at times he can barely contemplate, let alone formulate.

Alameddine’s poetry is richly allusive, a feature which works best when situations, events and personalities are contextualised clearly. This is assisted by the way poems are arranged so as to comment on each other, illuminating what can be at first somewhat mystifying references, as in the poem “Paths”: “The one who descended from an unknown place/was soon surrounded by the frightened ones”, an image suggestive of the tragic aftermath of civil unrest and its human consequences.

The poet skillfully juxtaposes the description of the women “alone next to the children’s beds,/gnawed by the rasps of fear” with hedonistic images of “masseurs and masseuses sway[ing] with the music”, symbolizing how many people’s lives are lived without any awareness of, or compassion for, the tragically disrupted existence of others. Such lives often absurdly parallel each other in the midst of conflict, whether it is between cities or individuals.

In “Image”, as the new millennium dawns, the persona reiterates his anguish at this struggle to be a conduit for the voices of the past, questioning, “How do I bring out voices in their letters/to move this silence?” In the first sequence, the persona in “The First” confesses that “I needed a lot of silence/ before I dug my first

grave”, taking Rumi’s advice, perhaps, to “Listen to silence. It has so much to say.”

Nonetheless he perseveres in the quest. The poem “Tracking” in the second sequence makes it clear that he is both chasing faces, voices and places, and paradoxically desperate to escape from “the place chasing me”. Although “the war promised its people paradise/now it cheats them”; we are confronted instead by images of desolation – abandoned homes, “bridges, doors/slammed by the wind”, a fragmentation and dispersal of the past and of humanity, a situation of exile which is powerfully evoked in the nomadic image of “memories/carried on horses roaming the plains”.

A world away, in Sydney, in the moving sequence, “I Suspect They Died Thirsty”, the persona’s recurring call for “some paper and a pen” and the visceral imagery emphasise the difficulty of writing about “creatures of flesh and blood”, those who were “masticated by exile”. “Deserts of loneliness,/ the bitterness before the long departure,/moments of slain childhood” – these things “sprouting in your life suddenly returning to you” are images which lie at the core of this sequence. At the same time, the persona is immersed in a parallel but deeply contrasting existence to that once lived in Beirut. In this other city, besieged by the daily trivia of domestic chores, the paranoia of writing surrounded by malice enacted in the past is chillingly evoked, along with his awareness of “predators closing in from every corner”.

Recollecting an early memory of living alone in Sydney in a building overlooking a hospital, the only sound he recalls is a knock on the door from a neighbour telling him about young men injecting needles into their veins. This image of an equally alienated and dysfunctional world

outside, this almost robotic choice of self-destruction, is juxtaposed with the silence of his days, a silence broken only by the imagined sound of a door colliding with the floor. This surreal touch only deepens his sense of isolation from others. When a photo of his disabled father reminds him of his funeral, the blood seeping from his hand, the persona becomes only too aware that while he might be in a city far removed from the destructive impact of past conflict, for him and many others “the war is not over”.

In the confronting poem about his father in the section, “My Father ‘The Magician’”, he attests to the continuing impossibility of forgetting the past: “What could a man do/who spends his days like a convict/on an electric chair and not killed by shock/or pardoned by his executioner?”

Likewise, his memory of the dancer turned tinsmith, Ahmad Al-Hussain, confronts us with its reiteration of the notion of survival despite mutilation, even if only to bear witness to the human capacity to inflict atrocities on the innocent: “His eyes have never returned to their sockets/since the booby-trap of/ the vegetable market in Tripoli.” This is a core truth that the reader takes away from this collection – that civil war, acts of terror and forced exile become an indelible part of their victims’ psychological, spiritual and physical landscapes, forever darkening the colours of their existence.

Surprisingly, this collection, focussed as it is on displacement, still affirms the viability of life, love, friendship, relationships. It strives to “welcome you to take happiness to the dancing floor”. There are flashes of optimism, conveyed through recurring natural imagery which suggests that by writing about the past, the “burnt

forest” will “become green”, and in “the dry field ... the flowers will bloom.” (“I Suspect They Died Thirsty”).

This is further emphasised by the amazingly beautiful artwork of Etab Hrieb. In capturing images of cities bathed in colour and light, and floating on water, the paintings provide a welcome contrast to the sombre subject matter of the poems. They counter, too, the symbol of Burj Elmurr in Beirut, an allusion which Alameddine employs to great effect in “Not to my liking”: this tall tower, now damaged and uninhabited, was used by militiamen as a sniping position in the civil war, and is still a repository of tragic memories for the city’s inhabitants. It is worth noting that in 2018, the artist Jad Al-Khoury installed colourful curtains blown by the wind like flags, and painted around the holes and scars in Burj Elmurr’s exterior, symbolically restoring hope to the urban landscape. Hrieb’s paintings of cities delight as much as those curtains.

Certainly, hope and optimism might be a delusion, with the nightmare of the past never far away in these poems. However, here and there, Alameddine affirms a better future, despite constant change and the vicissitudes of an imperfect world. Nature’s sunlight and storms still provide some support to our existence, warming our bodies and giving us a sense of the world’s reality “when we go alone/ on the paths of endless confusion.” Ultimately, the poet suggests, we don’t need “to dwell in the cities we love”. What is important is that “they leave in us/caravans and flocks of feelings,/that we are their children” (“The Cities”). The lives and activities of younger family members, too, provide balance and continuity for the persona, “so the family’s ship, sailing

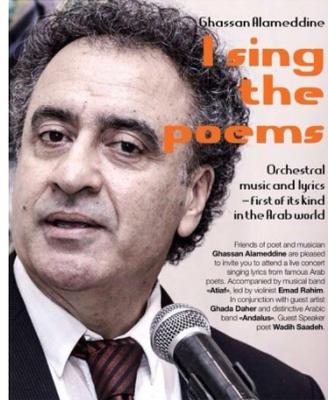
from/Tripoli to Cyprus to Sydney, does not drown” (“The Rhythm of Breaths”).

The poet continues to try to communicate his understanding of the impact of permanent exile, alluding to his unceasing “burning/of the embers of his longing for the land/for the people who were pushed away/in the deserts of loss” (“The Cities”). There is sometimes a desperate optimism in that, despite the shifting and provisional nature of language itself, suggested in the placing of a poem before the collection which questions whether “you want to say the same word/to the same woman,/the tree,/the café,/and the same world?” Certainly, the words are different; they themselves have migrated to other cities, they have been written in a different place and time, they have been translated into another language. But they have still been written: for the poet, as for the reader of *The Cities*, “[y]our consolation is to tell what you have seen.” (“I Suspect They Died Thirsty”)

*Louise Waking*

## THE POET

**Ghassan Alameddine** is an Australian-Lebanese writer, journalist, poet and musician. His writings appeared in leading Arabic newspapers. He has so far published five poetry collections and translated several books to Arabic. He founded and runs *The Oriental Musical Cultural Academy* for teaching music in Sydney.



## THE TRANSLATOR

**Raghd Nahhas**, an Australian of Syrian background, has many publications and translations in English and Arabic, in various fields. He has so far published eight translations of poetry collections, the most recent of which was Khalid al-Hilli's *No One Knows My Name*, Kalimat, Sydney 2019.



He published his own bilingual poetry collection in 2018, titled *FULLMOON – Thoughts in the Time of Facebook*.



In his poetry,  
Ghassan Alameddine  
is both assured and  
anxious.

His text flows like  
water, a pure  
breaking wave.

He is both the hunter  
and the hunted of the  
moment. He knows  
how to grasp poetic  
material and how to  
let it loose, as if into  
space.

His simultaneous  
deployment of various  
techniques, akin to  
photography,  
cinematography and  
theatre, contributes to  
the strength of his  
texts combining  
intimacy,  
contemplation,  
musicality, graphics  
and objectivity in a  
total poetic image.

*Paul Chaoul*