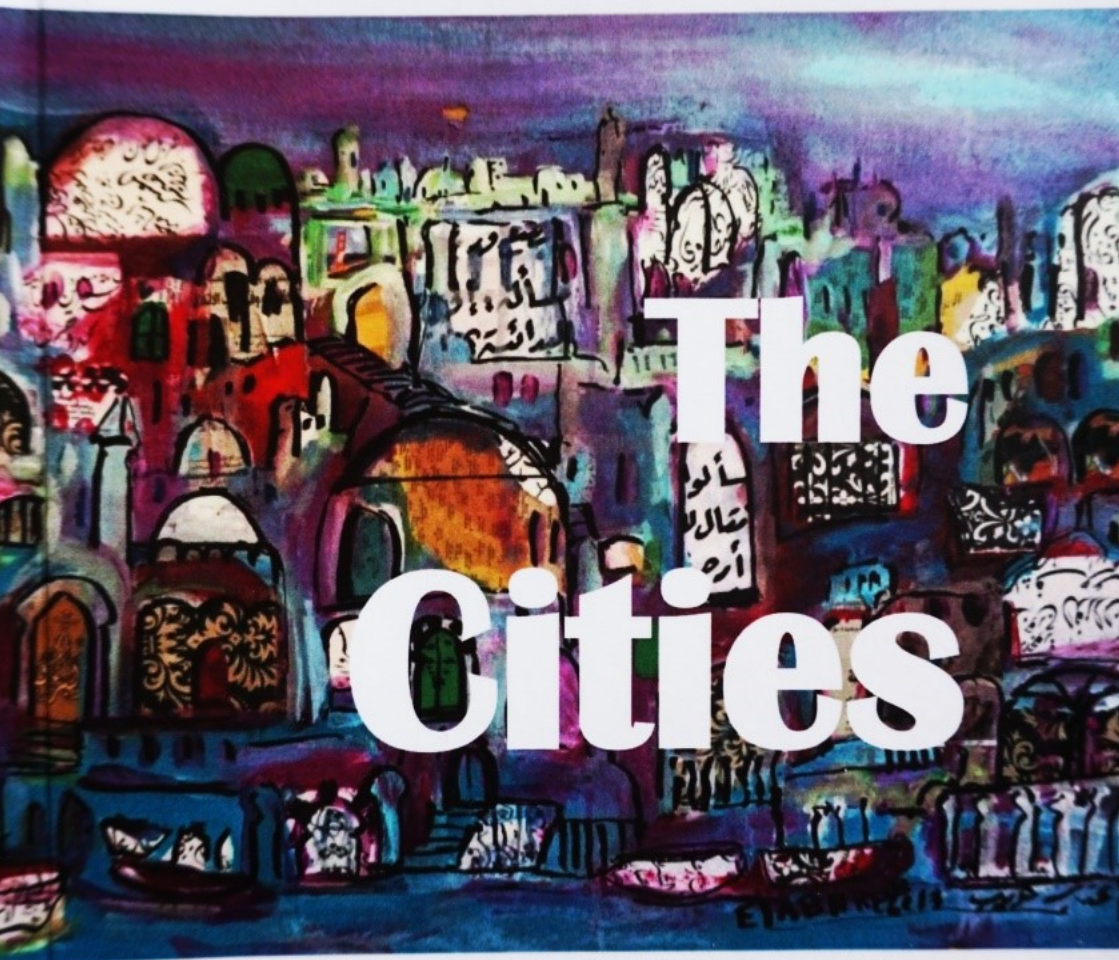


Ghassan Alameddine



The Cities

Translated from Arabic by

Raghid Nahhas

Ghassan Alameddine

THE CITIES

Selected Poetry

Translated from Arabic by

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The Cities

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كَلِمَات

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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 (Unpublished manuscript.)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.

Raghd 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.

**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,¹
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.

¹ 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,² 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.

² 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.³

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.

³ 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, Basheer⁴ 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.

⁴ 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



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

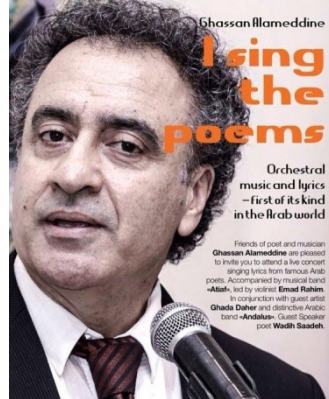
from/Tripoli to Cyprus to Sydney, does not drown” (“The Rhythm of Breaths”).

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.

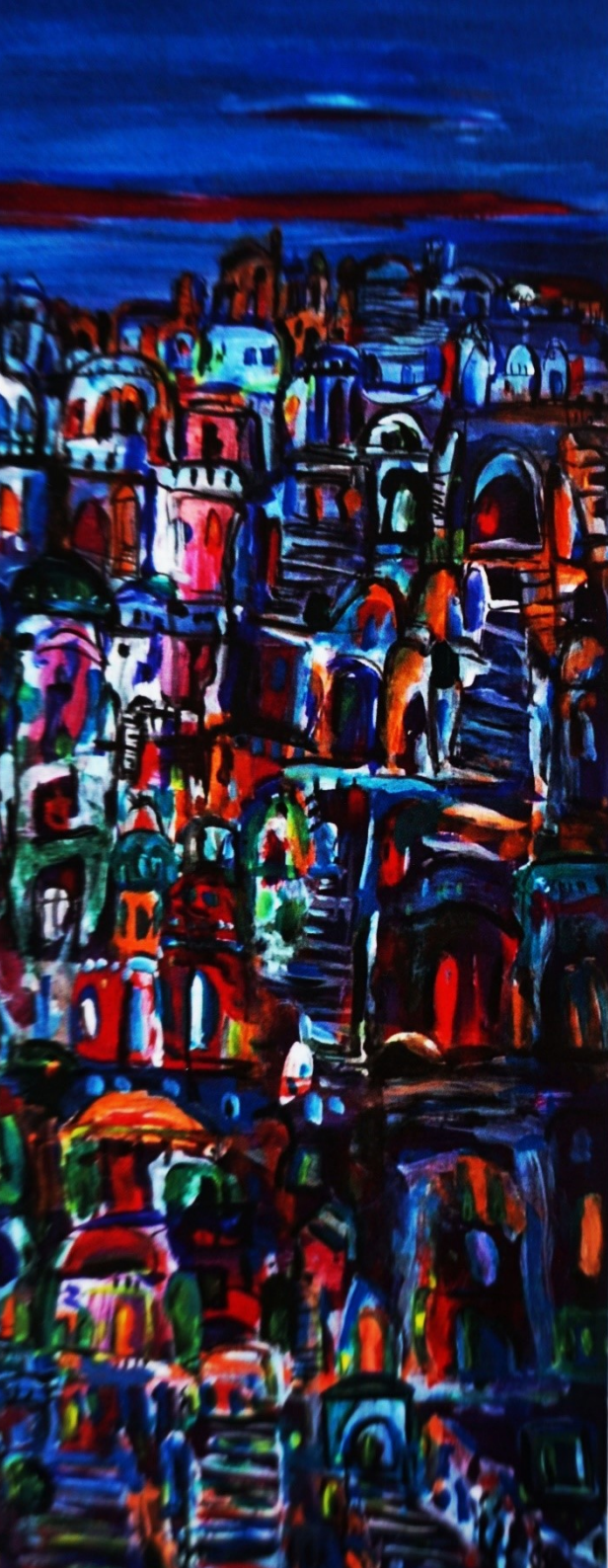


THE TRANSLATOR

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