

the poetry project

BOOK REVIEW

ETEL ADNAN

In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country

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The title of Etel Adnan's new book, *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country*, corresponds to William Gass's 1968 collection of stories *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*. While Adnan makes her regard for Gass's book known in her introduction, she also uses the title story as a point of dispute: "So you are in America, and I am here; you may think that you're in trouble, or that there's trouble in your country, but come here and see for yourself the mire into which we're sinking." This "here" for those that are new to Adnan's work, is Beirut, Lebanon, a city that endured civil war from 1975-90. However, Adnan is a poet of place with many places: Beirut, the Bay Area, Paris, all continually in focus as a singular and complex vision of interconnection and community. The operative word in Adnan's title is "another," which also calls to mind James Baldwin's novel of shifting identities and locales *Another Country*, and with it, she proceeds to take over Gass's structure of a heading followed by a paragraph. Adnan follows this procedure, repeating the same headings, five times throughout the book with a span of 25 years between the first and second writings, and concluding with "To be in a Time of War," written in 2003 as the United States invaded Baghdad. These emotional reiterations have an interval midway through the book called "At Both Ends," an empathetic piece on the figure and the folly of T.E. Lawrence.

Adnan's mostly single word headings include "Place," "Weather," "My House," "A Person," "Wires," and "Vital Data". One of the most unnerving themes is the continual scrutinizing of the concept of safety, especially as manifested in house as metaphor:

"I reside in cafes: they are my real homes. In Beirut my favorite one has been destroyed."

"But houses can be much worse, they can be pierced baskets from which one's life oozes and drains into the gutters."

Other accepted symbols of refuge are also exposed as potentially dangerous. Though Adnan loves the sea, she won't romanticize the water. Her enemy lives there too. The church is not a sanctuary. She warns her dying Muslim father to "beware" of the priests that ask him if he wants to go to paradise. We might expect Adnan to reveal, finally, that she finds safety in the act of writing, but there can be no certitude in a process that

necessarily continues to discover “its own open-ended, unstable definition.” Those who have been civilians in a combat zone, or who have read the reportage or literature (Ghada Samman’s novel *Beirut Nightmares* offers a compelling portrayal) know that the body and mind enter into a state of attempting to anticipate the unthinkable. Adnan points out in the introduction that during times of historical upheaval, grand events don’t impress the mind as heavily as “the uninterrupted flow of little experiences, observations, disturbances, small ecstasies, or barely perceptible discouragements that make up the trivialized day-to-day living.” Perhaps it is this kind of consciousness that keeps people sane (safe) during wartime. Adnan’s portrayal of T.E. Lawrence, or Lawrence of Arabia as he was sensationalized, takes seriously the adage “know your enemy.” Remembered by some as a hero, others as an Imperialist, she points out that the policies he helped engineer are bringing about disasters in the Middle East to this day. Remarkably, Adnan recognizes Lawrence as a deeply conflicted man, and some of the most humane passages in the book are on the nature of pain:

“And when you place your hand on where it hurts, you know that it isn’t there, it’s nowhere because it is non-spatial and, although it has duration, it isn’t in time either, being only in a perpetual present tense.”

Etel Adnan read from “To be in a Time of War” last October at the Poetry Project. There is a section about hearing Steve Lacy play here that perceptibly moved the crowd of over 100 gathered to see her.