

TESTIMONIALS

The Collapse in the Quiet

*Elmaz Abinader**

LEBANON, I HAD PUT YOU TO REST THIS SUMMER. Smoothed the last page of the book that cost years of research, interviews, translations, and visits. I've thrashed out the differences between interpretations, replayed old news videos like they were dear home movies, called out to the soldiers in every army, to the children hiding under the bed; to the women cooking hot in the bomb shelters. I studied your war more deeply than my family tree.

I had put the book to rest. In a world struck with fever, how could I sustain and develop the story? I kept writing: in gardens filled with wild tomato vines, in giant forests where treetops fused together, on empty beaches, feet dug into sand, words resting on my knees. Dreaming in an Arabic that was colloquial, illiterate and insufficient, I finished, confidently, I thought.

From my first book, *Children of the Roojme*, to this fourth one, *Almost a Life*, Lebanon and I dated, got to know each other, moved inside each other-Lebanon into me, me into Lebanon. Hundreds of history books, interviews, letters, diaries, news footage, journalism, poems, song, novels were exchanged, and I layered what I learned under the stories I knew, told by my parents about their lives in the old country. I witnessed their heartbreak when the Civil War (1975-1990)

* Elmaz Abinader is an author, a poet and a performer. Her books include a memoir: *Children of the Roojme*, *A Family's Journey from Lebanon*, a book of poetry, *In the Country of My Dreams* which won the Oakland PEN, Josephine Miles Award. Recently she was awarded a Trailblazer Award by RAWI (Radius of Arab Writers International). She has been anthologized widely including *the New Anthology of American Poetry*, and in *The Colors of Nature*.

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broke out and they watched Beirut burn on their television in Pennsylvania. And I waited with them for words, any words from home.

When I visited the first time in 1973, my parents' mythologies came to life. Walking along a sea my mother said was more turquoise than blue, driving into mountains that were laced by rock, cruising into the surprising greenness of the Bekka Valley -- all of it romanced me to their notions of Lebanon's grace. When I entered our village, Abdelli, and peered into the star smeared sky, I understood how this terrain can be inside of me, how my DNA was riddled with the pebbles of my parent's home town roads.

This final book -- final, I think -- is about a woman, Dede, who waits during the Lebanese Civil War for her fiancé in the US to send for her. Her life had to be constructed around the actual events of the war and the real experiences of those who survived it. Because it has been dubbed *The War of Amnesia*, the research stalled while contacts prepared themselves to speak about a time they wanted to put behind them.

I visited the country time and again. Walked the streets Dede would take from her flat in the Monot to her school at University of St. Joseph. I visited her cafes, post offices and libraries. Along the way, I begged security guards, professors, and shopkeepers to tell me a story, one story so I could understand more. The research sound-tracked the words of the scenes in *Almost a Life*, and the stories of the war became music to me.

Finally, it all ended. On the day of the Vernal Equinox, we were finished, the book, the research, the longing for more information. Lebanon and I could rest. I wrote 140,000 words of Dede's life in the war and her struggles in the US. A sigh of relief.

But Lebanon did not let me go. While I was polishing and querying and manicuring, teaching and reading, the country did not sit still. On August 4, on the news, I caught a view of Beirut: the port, the Corniche, Pigeon Rock. I remembered strolls along the beach, the lingering on the rail watching the fishermen and their long rods.

And then it exploded: the first time, a tremor in the chest; the second—I rose and fell and rose again. A gasp that did not exhaled. When the city exploded, the air became inhabited with flying glass, the sea burned a sickening ash, the trees in Martyr's Square collapsed as if they were never rooted. When the city ignites,

all was fire: the frantic rush to rescue a body, the words calling for help, the hearts who couldn't imagine what could survive or how they could live. Just like that, the cells shifted, in every living thing.

It became a day, days, of watching the news, emailing friends, looking through social media to see who had their homes, who didn't, who lost what, who was running away. Like my parents in 1973, I studied photographs of the streets, looking for familiarity. Is any of this near Dede's home? All of it was. There's the walk along the Corniche, the favorite café, the steps of the university where her fiancé proposed.

The explosion was just the beginning. Afterward, the government collapses. While resources were flown in, there was no direction, no security and no oversight. I could do nothing from California but write and write some more.

I had not let go, after all. The city of my obsession is in shambles: *Beirut is changed forever*. Now my cells must recalibrate Lebanon, we are at the beginning again: wondering how it will go, how the story will end. I keep listening to Lebanon's restless heart.