

Beirut, Lebanon

2004

At twelve years old, I finally finished reading *The Lord of the Rings*. In Beirut: there, architecture is battles layered, power stories.

A city rebuilding
itself yellowing stone
and oppressive air.¹

In my memory, Beirut exists as small pictures:

Gaping buildings, mouths howling Munchian, laundry lines strung like dental floss through teeth: collared shirts, children's dresses, all hanging still in balm-heavy air.

Corinthian columns I could touch. The color of old paper, ornate, rising from a smog-sooted intersection.

A spray of bullet holes on a shady wall. I did not finger the grooves of cool concrete, despite the city's heat.

Soldiers in army fatigues, leaning on arm-length black rifles like green figurines, guarding the McDonald's.²

The constant toots of car horns for weddings: I want mine to be like this - a caravan of noise. Only thing for which I want an automobile: an unraveling-me parade.³

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¹ Planning and zoning are virtually nonexistent in Beirut, which, although an over urbanized city center today, still adheres to the organic structure of an Islamic city in many ways: densely gathered streets, many of which loop into closed cul-de-sacs. Islamic cities are sometimes said to be characterized by their “formlessness and irregular mass of confusion.” Despite the existence of a large Christian population - it’s common to see pork items on restaurant menus - Beirut is structurally, very much an “Islamic” city. Before the Civil War began in 1975 (it lasted for 15 years), Beirut was considered the most completely Westernized city in the Middle East. The war destroyed many newer developments. However, by the time I visited in 2004, Beirut was in the process of being rebuilt, and to my eyes, had been much revived. This was the work of joint-stock company *Solidere*, which was commissioned to implement a plan for and re-build central Beirut, eighty percent of which had been destroyed during the war. *Solidere* was controlled in large part by Lebanon’s then-Prime Minister (and multi-billionaire) Rafiq Hariri. Hariri was assassinated in 2005. *Solidere* continues.

² My sister explained to me that there had been attempts to blow the McDonald’s up, as many Lebanese viewed it as a corporate outpost of American imperialism. The year I visited Lebanon, there had been at least four bombing attempts on American fast food outlets in Beirut. Since the beginning of the Iraq occupation in 2003, American businesses and Western embassies had been provided with armed guards by internal security forces.

³ In Lebanon, as in much of the Arab world, it is traditional for wedding attendants to follow behind the newlyweds in their cars, honking their horns. A frequent part of Beirut’s aural landscape.



Selçuk, Turkey

Numb from no sleep, we found our pension and didn't nap but showered quickly and left to make our way to Ephesus.

Saw pomegranate trees and picked their fruit, already splitting. My stomach was on the fritz, so this was one of the few times in my life when I've peeled a pomegranate solely for the pleasure of it. Nal didn't want to eat either, so we just picked at the seeds.

All the women here wore floral printed pants, like the women who worked in the farmlands near my aunt and uncle's place in Yalova.⁴

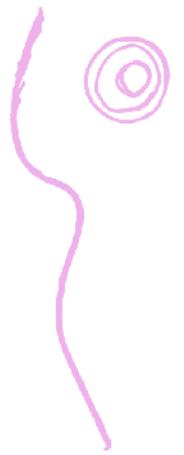
Returning at night, a man followed us back to our pension, to which we nervously found our way back by a business-card map. Looking over our shoulders we whispered to each other, he's still there, he's still there. We tried to ask a group of matronly women if we could walk with them for cover, but couldn't be understood and were merely suspicious. Broke out running, we were all right.

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⁴ Yalova, Turkey is a city located southeast of Istanbul, about an hour and a half across the Sea of Marmara by ferry boat. Known for its thermal baths, the area is also a major producer of agriculture and flowers.

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Ephesus

Like a dream I half make-up in retelling just after waking:
Dream logic colluding with accepted grammar.

Walking through a "city" that was no longer a city, but did have roads,
rules we break and have no reason to pretend, walking into a closed-
off area thick with blackberry brambles, fig and pomegranate trees
knit together like steel wool.

If you can map it, then
does that make it
functional, or just

legible? One man's legibility is another's scrawl.
Ruin over ruin, but - a city, nonetheless.
After all, it has a name - Ephesus.

And it has a daytime population of tourists and bees - red bees - fuzz
colored like henna, elegant, maybe they were old bees who'd gone to
a salon in preparation for an event; maybe even our arrival. We hop
scotched around them and craned down, fascinated.

In my exhaustion I hallucinated flowers adorning the sloping sides
of the city's walls and, as the sunset fell - an Arcadian sunset, Nalini
named it - I saw a ghost chariot, bony-white and definite, ride across
that orange and neon sky.



Whose myth was it?

Iko-Iko was stuck in my head, from a mix, a gift from Robbie. So there was a drum-stick rhythm to the day.

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Mevlana Cultural Center

Konya⁵

I had traveled to Konya from Istanbul by high-speed train caught early in the morning, sleep hungry. There were screens inside that indicated in red just how fast the train was going, in kilometers, which was very thrilling. There was breakfast, tomatoes and olives, cheeses and honey. There was a beautiful woman across the aisle at whom I stared for much of the ride, out of the corner of my eye and sometimes directly.

Early in the train ride, we passed between mountains, mountains pressing on either side, pressing invisibly because all was obscured by the densest fog I have ever seen in my life. Soft and purposeful, sentient even. I cried, overcome by great love -

love that didn't reside
in anything living -
that was, not 'for' or 'to'

but which surrounded, as the fog. Felt beside, above, around myself, within the fog of God, but not even That - I understood - but not with the intellect. Belief doesn't leave the body behind.

The cultural center⁶ was like a white man in a white suit: hard white, a clean slate of politics.⁷ I was a speck of dust which had been flown to the wrong planet, words written with the wrong instrument. A direct answer to the question, how does architecture make you feel? It



existed on an inhuman scale,⁸ better described without images, like something designed by Le Corbusier,⁹ it was empty, but not like land is empty -

It projected an adult loneliness, and I got out of there as quickly as I could.

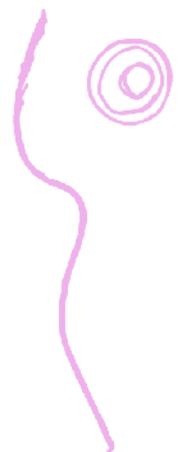
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⁵ English text from an informational placard at the Mevlana Cultural Center:

"Short History of Konya Metropolitan Municipality Mevlana Cultural Centre

The need of a place which could host Rumi lovers coming from all over the world by hearing Rumi's call "Come" has been on agenda of our city and also Turkey through many years. Searching for an indoor place began in 1980s to annually repeat this call of Rumi, which has been going on for an age, in a more beautiful and attractive place. With this aim, Mevlana Culture Centre Project Contest was held in 1990 and the project of Dr. Hasan Sener, professor at Istanbul Technical University, got the first rank among 69 projects. The foundation of the building, in front of which you stand right now, was laid in 1993; however, during the first ten years of the construction, only 10% of the building could be completed. In 2003, during his visit to Konya, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Turkey, H.E. Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdogan demanded that the construction of the building should be completed in a short span of time. Therefore, Konya Metropolitan Municipality took over the construction of the building through the protocol signed with the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Turkey Republic in 2004. The rest of the construction was completed under the supervision of Konya Metropolitan Municipality in one hundred days thanks to a team of one thousand people working 24/7 despite harsh winter conditions. Mevlana Culture Centre was opened by H.E. the Prime Minister Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdogan in 2004. More than 400,000 people can annually benefit from Mevlana Culture Centre for several activities. Mevlana Culture Centre of Konya Metropolitan Municipality is located on the land of 28.255 m² within the area of 100.000 m². It has an indoor Sama Hall of 3000 people, the largest one in the world, a main entrance and foyer areas of 2.500 m², exhibition spaces, Konya and Mevlana Specialty Libraries, Sultan Veled Hall with a capacity



of 600 people and various departments of Konya Metropolitan Municipality. Moreover, there are an indoor Sama Hall and the parking area with 400 car parking capacity. I wish you, visitors and people of Konya, could enjoy this distinguished building which has the capacity to host various activities every day of the year. - *Tahir Akyurek, Mayor of Konya Metropolitan Municipality*"

⁶ Where the main Sema occurs, and in which there were vendors selling various Sufi tchotchkes.

⁷ Sufism's history is fraught in Turkey. In Ataturk's newly-founded Turkish Republic, Sufi orders were banned and their institutions were shut down in 1925. Many Sufis emigrated to other parts of the former Ottoman Empire, such as Syria, Albania, and Bosnia, to continue their practices. However, the Mevlavi order (the bestknown Sufi order, with whirling dervishes) began to be resuscitated in the mid-1960s when the Turkish government recognized their power as a tourist attraction.

⁸ I use the term "inhuman" not as a value judgment, but as a descriptive fact.

⁹ Turkey was not left out of Le Corbusier's orientalist architectural dreams. In May 1911, on a visit to the city (but before his arrival there) Le Corbusier wrote of what he imagined Istanbul should be: "I want Stamboul to sit upon her Golden Horn all white, as raw as chalk, and I want light to screech on the surfaces of domes which swell the heap of milky cubes, and minarets thrust upward, and the sky must be blue ... Under the bright light, I want a city all white, but the green cypresses must be there to punctuate it. All the blue of the sea shall reflect the blue of the sky."

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Dolmens

Madaba, Jordan¹⁰

It was the weekend, and we felt we must search for something. We found the dead with a piss-poor map from a hotel where we stopped to ask for directions.

A good feeling to find something by a bad map. To look at rocks and wonder - just rocks? Shelter for the dead? Could any boulder be? Resting-place for giants?

Andrew comments, "You're so small" as I clamber into his truck. I ignore that.

A lucky feeling, to have a truck, to drive far out of the way and loop back. To look for, without being sure, until it is before you and you just know.

Pissed on a grave, which sheltered me cave-like from the wind and my own piss.

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¹⁰ Single-chamber megalithic tombs, mostly dating from the early Neolithic age (around 4000-3000 BC). They are made of a few vertical stones which support another that lies flat table-like (or roof-like) across them.

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These poems are taken from Noor Al-Samarrai's debut collection
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