

# The Brutal Chameleon Reflections on Reality Beirut, Lebanon

## Omar Sabbagh

Omar Sabbagh, Associate Professor of English, American University in Dubai (AUD), sabbagho@hotmail.com; his latest book is: Reading Fiona Sampson: A Study in Contemporary Poetry and Poetics (Anthem Press, 2020).

I hail of course from the moneyed classes of West Beirut. And as I look out of the wide near-wall-wide window of my parents' sumptuous flat, regarding miseries within and those without, I find myself thinking about the nature of reality. In Lacanian thinking the real is a lacuna-like site, where the truth of our wounds are; and, as wounds, they are like missing links or gaps in the otherwise common plain of our awareness. But in the more workaday sense, and with special purchase perhaps in Lebanon of all places, reality just is politics; because reality is ground zero, for one thing, and because reality is never, thus, a positive sum scenario. For a long time, and perhaps to this day, I have been privileged enough to consider myself a-politicized in the second sense, and obtuse enough to have continuously shored up and sutured truths about my life, making illicit as it were common ground between those latter and the board of my defense network, my ego organization, my imaginary, or what have you. The first of the above results from never having been truly challenged in a material sense, needs and desires tapped and on tap, thankfully (or not); the second effects itself via my rigorously capable way of turning all realisations into spoken insights that thus elide their native, more truthful ground. By making fundamentals and grounds where in sooth there are or should not be any, I lift myself up rather than let myself fall, when and where

of course I should, let myself fall, felled, that is. Hubris, conceit, pride, stubbornness, you name it: but also a deep humility that is sourced in or sources (I can never quite tell) that kind of laziness that makes me a philosophical conservative. When you think about and about reality enough you begin to lose your grip of it. Reality is exactly what you can't grasp or grip. But as I say, I mourn in moments of starkest honesty the handiness and dexterity of my mind, which in this sense stays me, stilled, always the rudest traitor to me, if not I.

Now to power in a way. One can dye the daily round of daily experiences in rose or rose gold, of course, and also in sepia. And despite what I may have to say here, there is a licit and luminous truth to that romanticizing process. The sunsets I love and the coffee-colored autumn leaves that crunch underfoot, such things are billed with purpose. I like to tell myself stories, because a large and important part of me, like any person, wants and needs and indeed should justify experience with narratives. But those tales and lays, kindnesses, are also kinds of escape, cowardice – pace Nietzsche. If I can be far too generous to myself, I can also don the hair-shirt of a realist. Dignity and bread, aren't they the two staple, most stable facets of life for the human animal? Yes, of course they are. Bread is not just biological nourishment

## The Brutal Chameleon Reflections on Reality Beirut, Lebanon

Omar Sabbagh

though, it opens the heart and is perhaps one if not the passageway to what we like to think of as freedom. Because freedom, in my book, is the capacity of or for possessing options, and time in your hands, for your mind. Dignity, by turns, so highfalutin, is a trap, if a very virtuous one. Worth, respect, integrity, ingredients perhaps of one's ambient dignity, well, they speak for themselves. But they can also limit you, and your options. Yes, one's spirit may go manumitted by the possession of dignity, but that latter can also cuff you, as you traipse your way, moping like a misanthrope, towards the impracticalities that may come to hinder or hurt or jail you. You must pick your fights, naturally; which means burying dignity, not just at times, but most of the time: if you want bread that is, if you want the chance of or at some signal sense of freedom. These may seem paradoxical thoughts, but they attempt to touch the reality of the matter, mark ground. And so, if politics, the tragic conflicts of zero and negative sum games, is for the vast, vast majority the very pith of reality, then politics might be fruitfully seen as the fighting-ground not for dignity and bread, but between them. Beggars can't be choosers. And we are all, ultimately, beggars. And if there's a fight for bread and what it stands for as a metonym, for things like health care, social care, and so on, it's not necessarily that fight that's the site for power-plays. It's the arrows at the clout, at the more symbolic capital of dignity, that are where we story our power-plays. Because reality is not bread. Bread is the avenue onto the promenade of reality. And dignity is never truly real. It's a cello-thick illusion; the illusion of things like this, words that limn in black print across phalanxes of lines. But I like my illusions, now and then: they pick at something true or real, too. That said, perhaps the only thing to surface from that

picking dig is the bread I bear in my pocket, the wife away for the day, the child, an infant, our undying gem, being easily catered to, for, by her grandparents and the maid, to boot. The time to write these words, then, and the times that have permitted me the bolstering of these, my wits that guide the wrist, are both worth and are not worth one crumb of a loaf of bread – like the loaf, that's to say, at hand, granted, taken, waiting for me at my leisure in the kitchen of this luxurious flat in West Beirut. I won't do the mathematics here, because I don't have to.

Some people, and I won't say who, often see me, because that's the way I can come off, as the implicit exemplar of the master-politician. I think what they must mean are my gifts for survival. Egotism again, a capacity for control. And it's true that such power over myself has at times at least permitted me a certain quiet force over my surroundings, much like that of a highly-talented and insightful actor. But there is no true authority in that just-named capacity. The master-politician as such is a beggar, just a beggar, who cannot, does not choose. No; any token of authority I may possess comes not from my chameleon-like survival instinct, but from the brutal chameleon that evinces an equal music around and about me, debilitating me and debasing me. Acceptance is perhaps the keystone upon which any arching chance of happiness may be built. And you don't accept the reality of the matter until reality matters to (at) you. If politics in its best sense is the wound of ground zero that same wound is a present. Politics in the former sense is not real; it's a small-nosed bartering with death, not life, for a few moments more.

And I suppose what I mean to say by all this

## The Brutal Chameleon Reflections on Reality Beirut, Lebanon

Omar Sabbagh

is that the very vague, abstract, nay close to otiose impression I have of the realities of Lebanon, tells me things about myself, as much as my own structures of feeling feed the aforementioned impressions. To move into the future, where both moving and futurity may mean something, must mean to my mind to eschew both: not addressing the past, wounds, and only addressing the past, wounds. A dynamic balance of working bits and pieces of both seems to me to be the only basic or bare, logical solution to a problematic like this nation as I see it, a nation just shy of one hundred years old and for all that time never the master or mistress of herself. Just so, I too must do the necessary to get from today to tomorrow, but at the end of that chronological serial movement, if it stays a mere chronological serial movement, is death, obliteration. Desirousness, that egotistical gambit, holds a bellyful of death, in the guts merely what my wife calls, berating me rightly, 'chasing time.' It's only in the kairetic moments (between) that one might infuse time, history, presence, with life. And that requires canniness, savviness: a politics that shies away from both expediency and utopian pipe-dreams, the hypostases of cynicism and idealism. A politics that dances to the music of the times, where the dancer is in the dance as much as the inverse or converse. A purposiveness but without purpose, or, at least, without only one domineering purpose. Limbs must be limpid, flexible, ready for the strains that are deeply needed to leaven a tale from time. Because a story of scuttled, rattling bones needs flesh to make it the story of one body, joy. And that body, ideally, should move, and the only way it seems to me for that movement to be real movement is for that movement to move itself; and the only way that happens is by

checking the game: a dose of cynicism here, a tad or touch of idealism there, but always in a way to outrun or outpace the way things, as things, just are; which is to say: inertia, the glum-faced laziness of reality.

History is made and makes itself. It is either of the upper-case stuff, as when we use the term proverbially: 'This is history (in the making)!' Or it doesn't bear that capitalized initial, and we mean it more straightforwardly. What is happening here, I'd venture (and this is only a vaguely-tracked impression), is that both options or angles of vision are operative. Yes, what we've seen and followed on the news about this Lebanese revolution is an event that may set the patterns of future history in the second sense, a moment that stands-out of the chronological series, enabling the same, onwards. But such might be attenuated and pierced by the older patterns, ruts. I imagine the way-out of the current mess will be, because this is the only logical way it could come to be, a gradated form of root-and-branch change, where that is not by any means an oxymoronic phrase, but a pragmatic description. Ten percent may happen today, this year, two percent next, thirty-seven the next year, and so on, until the full girth of changeful intents are exhausted. That's as it should be; but not necessarily as it will. Yes, we have witnessed, I'd guess, again, an event of and for history. But only the more workaday events on the ground might potentially live-up to that break. Because to live-up to it means to negotiate a series of problems, vertical and horizontal, that are kaleidoscopic in the worst sense. That said, all knowing parties (and I'm certainly not one of them) with whom I've spoken, seem to think that a dam has been broken. And that

## The Brutal Chameleon Reflections on Reality Beirut, Lebanon

Omar Sabbagh

all the technology, sleazy or hale, in the world will never reconstitute the same large stone wall. Water flows in a way that's fresh as the painter's light I spied the other day, from a balcony high up overlooking the AUB gardens, after a torrential storm; the leavening light, as it were, to match rain that was, and is, of Biblical proportions. Can they weather the storm? Will they? Will they build a school of arks to ride the waves into the future? I think so; I can't but think that. But it's to be a tempestuous process; storms always are, by definition. But that last, after all, is the presiding element of my toolkit, words, words that engender and beget thinking, never creating a thing though; unlike the people on the streets of Lebanon.

When I think of the importance of family, the image of Beirut looms and weaves and knits loud and large in my mind's eye. Though I have only ever lived here on a continuous basis for two consecutive years, and for all the British-ness of my way of thinking, Lebanon, The Lebanon, remains like a starry vestige my father's most oaken dream, hope, caught moving, or still, in the liminal frame of his eyes; those eyes, loving, and loving with a thirst that might well be quenched, and with staggered grace – even if not in his lifetime. I owe that man, my father, everything; like any progeny, I wouldn't be in and a part of existence if it wasn't for him, but it's also true to say that I may well not have persisted in that same extant universe if it wasn't for him. Doing the algebra, then, it follows in a kind of generous-minded syllogism, that I wouldn't be here, either, if it wasn't for the dream of Lebanon, The. And to recoup a few steps on Lacanian ground, I may well to this day not have traversed my imago, not in any fulsome sense, anyway. The identity diffusion I once

suffered from, source of my gift with musical words, has stayed with me to a certain extent at least, and that, because, as I guess it, my father for his own fatherly reasons, wishes for me to stay his son. And that last way of putting it bifurcates, naturally, and in more than just one way. I will always be his son, but in a different, perhaps parallel universe, I may have been challenged in a different way than that by which I have been, and become, sooner, swifter, with burlier force, something like or closer to my own man. Lebanon, The, is thus like a stilling force in my life, and the motor of the same. Which is a paradoxical formulation, again, but from the nature of reality, which in my view and experience is in its pith a ground of tragic, inexorably tragic conflict, paradox, and paradox not susceptible to reduction or resolution just is the way we might (try, and try to) mark ground, bear truth, unveil, reveal the wounds of living, the living-wound. Words of course lend themselves to this kind of serpentine thinking, serpentine phrasing, snaking parsing, but I can't live without them as such. In the beginning was the mote, as it were, and the mote, to become a facet of the starry firmament, a denizen of the constellations, must by its nature speak among other particles of dust. One cannot jump out of one's skin. One shouldn't try to, thus. Lebanon, The, is small, and from one perspective at least, weak, debilitated; but Lebanon, The, is also strong, and primarily because she has the nous and wherewithal of her own self-awareness. Self-awareness is the root of many deep-bowelled joys, but like dignity, it can cost, demand a fee. When you are, as the Lebanese are, gifted, by geography and history and the chance of racial mix among no doubt many other more contingent factors, and challenged to rise by such, and when to boot you are at every turn stoppered by a

## The Brutal Chameleon Reflections on Reality Beirut, Lebanon

Omar Sabbagh

litany of frustrations, you may well generate a doughty portion of rage in your guts, spilling out, prodigal or prolific. To liberate that rage though, one must not tighten the knot, and rage and rage and rage. Because, like the past when it stills itself as itself, rage, being only itself, spilling bile, is a recipe for stone, for lifelessness and petrification. Recall, to recoup another Christian trope, the pun and paradox of the founding moment, supposedly, of that latter religion. You are Peter. A name, and a rock. And perhaps it might be true to say, that one must choose between having a name, and coming into the inheritance of the bread of life. Call it what you will, but life, survival, which is in the barest sense the first step on the rungs of the ladder of flourishing, is bigger and wider and more signifying than the most redolent, or dolorous name. The Lebanon is a dream. So, to realize, actualize it, perhaps the humility of shearing names away, sects away, judgments away is like a sine qua non. Perhaps we need to un-name ourselves. Perhaps we need to go shorn and naked into the streets, asking nothing but for open hearts, not the clogging and the clotting of veins. The living artery of change needs blood-flow, blood and flow to bolster the rest of the body, one, and, as one, joyous. That's the (real) flesh behind the hope anyway. Because if there is oneness at all, it needs to be invented as well. That's the truth of the matter, as I see it. The reality I see that sees me.

Bastardy and fate speak to each other, fatefully, and faithfully, from lip to cup cup to lip, to lip, to lip. I wake to my father's beard. The stubble, roughshod but still somehow ironclad, is greyer than it was wont to be: and that is no mere lackadaisical description of the literal sight of it, no. It is for me like

what Kant called a categorical imperative, a should, a should not, that holds universally, like the fortress of a law. But not like a law that chances into its universal scope, but like a law that founds, grounds. To dilate, touched, a touch: I have often thought that Kant's seminal notion of the synthetic a priori truth, whose telling asymmetry I'll explicate to the best of my ability presently, picks out or cashes out something about, if not an intellectual temperament, the temperament of one like me, a merely-nascent system-builder. The asymmetry works like this, as I like to understand it. You have certain formative structures that facilitate the thinking of the everyday. These forms, structures, just wouldn't be if they weren't at the service of the everyday stuff of experience, which they form, structure, allow ingress to some kind of understanding or awareness. That said, they remain somehow distant, at one remove from the very stuff upon which they, from a different angle of vision, radically depend, hang-from. And that means that while they owe deep, desperate obeisance to the existents of the everyday, they are never, and never may be, will be, reducible to the total sum, now, then, to come, of all that existent stuff, arrowed at us. And this seminal notion of an asymmetry is a bit like how my mind has come to work, or at least, very distantly, picks out what an earlier philosopher called intellectual intuition. I may have always possessed a certain mathematical, or ratiocinative capacity, but the patterns, logoi or mythoi, that now filter or screen how I process and how I think of, through and about my life's experience, were, in an infinitesimally gradated way, I'd guess, like the real, only formed fully and girded, as they may continue to be, by the voracious infusion of data permitted me by my early-founded

## The Brutal Chameleon Reflections on Reality Beirut, Lebanon

Omar Sabbagh

bibliophilic tendency. The loop-back though continues apace. Which is to say, it works, not like a totalizing circle, but like a spire, spiral, a reflexive moving between abstract patterns and concrete stuff, lending and leading inferences that take me at times towards insight, touching earth, marking ground. If the good God may exist anywhere in me, he exists at that turnstile, hinge, pivot, swivel. That's where, to put it otherwise, oneness and many-ness, mingle, one and not so, one and not so, one and not so, and so on. To gather-in some threads, then: my father gods me like his honor and integrity god him. That's a kind of fate, character. I am no bastard, except to myself. In this way, I father my father fathering me. It might even have been funny, otherwise. The greatest evil, tragedy, to befall one, goes the Arabic proverb, is actually very funny. But then, there probably is a right answer to all this mess, black, white, or black or white. The tragedy is not there; the real baneful truth of the matter is: I don't matter enough, either because I don't, or because I do, too much. Which is to say, I guide the words that pick at the earth of this digging, while they guide me; I guide them, that is to say, while they guide me. He is but he isn't. That's how the voices of my paranoiac self once visited me in times of wild and uproarious hysteria. I was in Cuba at the time,

laughing my head off at the end of the world. But I wasn't at home. No, I certainly wasn't. I was alone. When you cut your finger just shy of the nerve, the nerve once cut meaning no more finger-use, you have a choice between two poles: either you damn the accident, or you thank God for it, because the nerve that was cut just wasn't. A decimal above zero is infinitude for the mortal man, like myself, like anyone. So: Thank God, Thank God, Thank God. The fate of a man cut-off and cut-away for so long is the fate of man cosseted in the bosom of love. From crooked timber, shall we say, something straight was born. But it is tiny, very tiny content; and I am sorry for that, infinitely so, too. In fact, I am sorry for so much. My sorrows fit inside a thimble, though, while two things at least continue apace: the world going on, and Lebanon in an agony. The nightmare will end of course, by waking. The beards of our fathers: Ach...and like Faulkner. They curse and they damn us, while, even if in the process of turning far gone, they proffer the only thread or tether onto the future. It is, to repeat, only at the end of one's tether that one truly begins to seam the rope of life with knotted flesh, a reed. At ground zero we may find grace. The worst that can happen has. And that makes us riveted. We now have only one reality. Which means we can grip, and do.