

M A J D A G A M A

Beirut Volta

Setrak never met my eyes: tightly wound, cagey,
he must have been Christian militia. Could there be
a better guide for a Muslim woman in this city?
Our incongruence followed us through East and West
church next to mosque, veils and wine; Hizbullah.
At my request we lingered past Martyr's Square.
He wooed me with his Beirut: a city fluent
in French, Armenian, English, Arabic.

And the food its own language! The Lebanese
eat their landscape. At ease I remarked on the street
dogs so skinny and worn, *miskeen* . He turned to me,
said *in the war I killed a dog because it scared me*
and laughed. Beirut receded; I lost my breath and sobbed.
This murdering Christian; I cried for the dogs of war.

Into Ba'albek

There are days of wonder
when Hiraj drives, even if he does
almost convince us in a golden
afternoon away from Beirut
that a side trip to Damascus
will be no problem; he'll drop us
at the border, we'll take a taxi
to the old quarter. Our journey
is smooth out of Ashrafiyeh
over the new concrete bridge,
into the flat, green land of Ba'al.
We leave the ghosts of snipers
behind to meander through fields
of young wheat and hashish,
our route indirect to avoid
bandits. This valley is a land
of parallel Gods: Bacchus
and Maronite vineyards, Marian
shrines and temple prostitutes;
an ancient base of sun-worshippers,
shepherds, now Hizbullah and our
white, unmarked minibus ticking
through the wilds of Beqa'a
to the Heliopolis. I crack nuts
purchased in a Druze village and wait
for the columns of Jupiter to appear.

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