



## *Selected Poems*

### **Country • Practicing Loving Kindness • Peace • No • Night Sky • Living History • Cyclones and Seeds**

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This is a selected offering of new and previously published poems by Palestinian-American writer, scholar, and poet Lisa Suhair Majaj. She writes, “poetry emerges from the self, but is grounded in the wider world. As poets, we write in the hope that words can weave a cord of connection between individuals, between cultures, between countries—that words can take us beyond our single selves and locate us within the web of humanity. We all wish to be ‘candles in the darkness’—we write in the hope that our words may help to buoy others on their journeys through personal and public histories, just as the words of Darwish have buoyed, and still buoy, so many of us. We too often experience ourselves as small boats bobbing in a large sea of indifference and injustice, but connected by words we remember our humanity—our place in the whole. And out of this connection we find the power to bear witness and to take action, aware that the whole is larger than any sum of its parts, and that the smallest gesture resonates beyond our knowing.” The long poem “Country” is published here for the first time. Poem “Cyclones and Seeds” was first published in *Mizna*, Volume 4, Issue 1, 2002, p. 15-20. Poem “No” was first published in *Nerve: Linking Artists, Activists, Poets, Thinkers, Creative Folks and Community*, Issue #1, Power and Choice (Summer 2006). Poem “Living in History” was first published in *The Other Voices International Project*, Vol. 18, Feb. 2006. Poem “Practicing Loving Kindness” was first published in *Cadences: A Journal of Literature and the Arts in Cyprus*, vol. 2, # 1&2, summer 2006. Poem “Night Sky” was first published in *Babel Fruit*, Volume 3 Issue 4, Autumn 2008, online at [http://web.mac.com/renkat/BABEL\\_FRUIT/BabelFruit.html](http://web.mac.com/renkat/BABEL_FRUIT/BabelFruit.html).

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Lisa Suhair Majaj, a Palestinian-American writer and scholar, has read and published her work widely across the U.S., Europe and the Middle East. Her poetry and creative nonfiction have appeared in journals such as *World Literature Today*, *91<sup>st</sup> Meridian*, *Perihelion Review*, *Banipal: Magazine of Modern Arab Literature*, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, *Visions International*, *Cadences: A Journal of Literature and the Arts in Cyprus*, *The Jerusalem Times* and elsewhere. She is also a longtime scholar of Arab-American literature. Her previous book publications include two chapbooks of poetry and three co-edited collections of literary essays: *Intersections: Gender, Nation and Community in Arab Women’s Novels*, *Etel Adnan: Critical Essays on the Arab-American Writer and Artist*, and *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers*. Her academic affiliations have included Amherst College, College of the Holy Cross and Northeastern University. She recently won the Del Sol Press Poetry Prize for her poetry volume *Geographies of Light*. She lives in Nicosia, Cyprus.

**COUNTRY**

Here there are cypress trees  
tall enough to break through fear  
green as the promise to keep on living

here we are far away, and near

          cordon of gasps  
          breath flung in horror  
          hauling in grief

          stunned faces tilted upwards  
          too dazed to cry

broken phone lines  
endless dialing  
          paroxysm of fear  
till we reach those there

voices broken by static

          oh safe!  
          train late  
          meeting cancelled  
          child sick  
but for a trick of fate  
would have been  
          there

country of agony  
          country of fear

•••

*James Wang, 21, a photography student...  
looked up and saw people high in the north tower...  
'They jumped. One woman, her dress  
was billowing out.'* —*New York Times, Sept. 13, 2001*

they threw themselves headfirst  
into the dark morning

some holding hands  
others swimming singly downwards  
minnows  
caught in the cascade  
of vertical fire  
carried on the downdraft  
a short time

•••

*"This is America," a man said. "How can it happen in America? How?"  
—New York Times, Sept. 13, 2001*

no words for the suddenly empty skyline

smoke hangs over history  
ash blackening lungs

those crushed    burned  
killed in a desperate leap into

nothing

their absence a fierce wound  
borne  
by the living

walls plastered with pleas for the disappeared

*looking for  
Lydia, 21, birthmark on her left cheek  
Robert, last seen on the 21<sup>st</sup> floor  
Mary, brown hair; black eyes  
Tom, walks with a limp*

grimed anguish  
flapping in the rain

•••

beneath the news  
smolder embers of history

with blurred vision, we peer into the dark  
of America

*Here is a map of our country:  
here is the Sea of Indifference, glazed with salt...  
A patriot is one who wrestles for the  
soul of her country  
as she wrestles for her own being...A patriot is a citizen trying to wake  
from the burnt-out dream of innocence...to remember...  
that every flag that flies today is a cry of pain”  
(Adrienne Rich, An Atlas of the Difficult World)*

at the nation's borders  
the desperate peer across rivers  
    deep as grief  
    wide as history

tributaries bridged by the reaching hands  
of children

    ravines filled with sharp rocks, shrapnel,  
    ravaged bodies, blackened earth

•••

we built tall buildings  
that did not make us large

now we are puny  
afraid to fly travel speak  
to stand tall  
    for justice

*These are the places the U.S. has bombed since WWII: China. Korea.  
Guatemala. Indonesia. Cuba. The Belgian Congo. Peru. Laos.  
Vietnam. Cambodia. Grenada. Libya. El Salvador. Nicaragua.  
Panama. Iraq. Bosnia. Sudan. Yugoslavia. And now Afghanistan.*

If our bombs are large enough murderous enough  
our planes swift enough  
our guns big enough  
our soldiers fierce enough  
will we be unafraid?

(and what of the spirit  
loud and angry  
huddled inside its fear?)

•••

if only sorrow could be pieced together  
like the fragments of a broken bowl

each person a jagged shard  
in the whole

if only we could learn  
how large our hearts  
how fragile

•••

half a million Iraqi children  
cries stilled by hungry earth  
graves dug by sanctions  
by silence

in Afghanistan,  
thousands bombed to  
nothingness  
huts of mud and grass

a child in a hospital bed  
wakes to limbless  
orphan-hood

•••

What have the trees seen?

Every night the birds return to their nests  
perch on branches  
proffer insects to their young

their little lives beyond us  
part of us

My heart, squeezed small,  
strains against its hard shell  
of grief

the children whose unknowing  
 exploded in a fireball  
 of pain

the mothers  
 who did not return,  
 the fathers

(empty bellies,  
 long winter of starvation)

•••

And if in my name bombs are dropped  
 on other women, other men,  
 children as precious as my own—  
 and I stay silent?  
 Grief is not enough.  
 Words are not enough.  
 Dollars are not enough.

And when one day my daughter asks,  
 where were you when children like me were dying?

•••

What is the calculus of death?  
 How many small atrocities  
 equal one large atrocity?

*Altogether, at least 18 Palestinians were killed by the Israeli army  
 in the past two days. Among those killed was a 71-year old man  
 from Beit Likia, shot by soldiers for the crime of trying to bypass  
 the earthen barrier blocking the single exit road from his village...  
 another big-scale invasion by an armored column took place  
 during the past day at the venerable town of Jericho, and there  
 were sundry bombings and bombardments at various other spots.  
 —Gush Shalom, Sept. 14, 2001*

Palestinians distribute their children  
 among the neighbors,  
 in hopes that some, at least,  
 will escape the shelling.

Another day,  
 another home demolition.

•••

Sirens of mourning circle the world:  
black band of sorrow.

Children in foreign countries hang plaques  
on trees, remembering the New York dead.

Elsewhere, entire villages  
are demolished, flushed out, cleansed.  
Elected officials deny, excuse.

(Did you flip quickly to the comics?  
Was there even a story?)

•••

*oh beautiful for*

childhood mornings  
overseas American

*I pledge allegiance to*

hot dog Fridays Halloween dodgeball  
library books shipped all the way  
from the US of A

*my country 'tis*

to Jordan land of towel-heads  
terrorists  
camel jockeys  
halfbreeds

litany of unbelonging  
*not American enough not white enough*

litany of belonging  
*who I was born as who my mother was who my children are*

hand on my heart  
*one nation,  
indivisible*

country of hatred  
country of love

*and to the republic  
for which*

and with belonging comes  
responsibility

*with liberty and justice  
for all*

•••

*Generations do not cease to be born. And we are responsible to them, because we are the only witnesses they have... the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us, and the light goes out.—Tim Wise, Alternet, Sept. 13, 200)*

•••

God bless

America the beautiful  
America the good  
America the brave  
America the weapons merchant  
America the war-monger  
Fortress America  
America beacon of light and freedom  
America quencher of democracy  
America the righteous  
America sponsor of torturers, assassins, dictators  
America my country  
God bless

•••

Oh Earth

my world!



**PRACTICING LOVING KINDNESS**

Bless the maniac  
barreling down the one-way street  
the wrong way,  
who shakes his fist when I honk.  
May he live long enough  
to take driving lessons.

Bless the postman  
puffing under the no-smoking sign.  
(When I complain, my mail  
goes mysteriously missing  
for months.) Bless all those  
who debauch the air:  
the mother wafting fumes  
across her baby's carriage,  
the man whose glowing stub  
accosts a pregnant woman's face.  
May they unlearn how to exhale.

Bless the politicians  
who both give and receive  
bribes and favors.  
Bless the constituents  
seeking personal gain,  
the thieves, the liars, the sharks.  
And bless the fools  
who make corruption easy.  
May they be spared  
both wealth and penury.

Bless the soldiers guarding checkpoints  
where women labor and give birth  
in the dirt. Bless the settlers  
swinging clubs into teenager's faces,  
the boys shooting boys with bullets  
aimed to kill, the men driving bulldozers  
that flatten lives to rubble.  
May they wake from the dream of power,  
drenched in the cold sweat  
of understanding. May they learn  
the body's frailty, the immensity of the soul.

Bless the destroyers of Falluja,  
the wreckers of Babylon,  
the torturers of Abu Ghraib  
and Guantanamo Bay.  
May they understand desolation,  
may they comprehend despair.

Bless the peace makers,  
the teachers, the word-workers;  
the wavers of flags  
and the makers of fighter jets.  
May we know the ends of our labor,  
and the means. May we make  
reparations. May we rebuild.

Bless this planet, so cudgeled,  
so bounteous: the rain forests,  
the tundra, the ozone layer.  
May it persevere beyond  
our human follies. May it bloom.

Bless cynicism. Bless hope.  
Bless the fingers that type,  
the computer that processes,  
the printer that prints.  
Bless email and snail mail.  
Bless poetry books that cross oceans  
in battered envelopes,  
bearing small flames of words.

## PEACE

Peace is two children walking toward each other from different sides of a barricade. Behind them are the tin shacks where they live with their parents in anger and desperation and loss. At the barricade they solemnly show each other what they have brought. One child has a shovel, the other child a watering can. Each has a seed. They dig the earth, plant the seeds, sprinkle water carefully, then go home. Each day they meet again at the barricade to see if the seeds have grown. When the first tiny shoots emerge they slap hands gleefully through the fence. When a bud emerges they laugh out loud. When a flower breaks to light, petals silken as sunshine, they go home humming a flower song, each in their own language.

## No

There's no poetry in it,  
but I need to say something about No,  
how it stands up, no matter how unpopular,  
in the face of injustice. Maybe it can't  
thwart history: the powerful have always known  
what they can do, and they do it.  
No can't stop an avalanche.  
But No could be a retaining wall  
built of rough stones wrested from the earth,  
carried one by one up the hill on someone's back.  
No might be a tree in the middle of a village street:  
traffic shifts to flow around it, its presence  
a reminder of what used to be, what won't be  
forgotten. No is the perimeter of stubborn cactus  
springing up around destroyed villages.  
You can bulldoze houses, evict or kill the inhabitants,  
but the thorns of memory can't be eliminated.  
No is steadfast. It knows what it's like  
to have nothing in its hands but dignity.

## NIGHT SKY

*(Nicosia, Cyprus)*

I line the candles up in my window:  
tall, short, fat, round, square.  
Lit, the flames burn equally.

Outside, the sky holds constellations  
I remember from childhood nights,  
my mother's patient voice

directing my gaze. Big Dipper.  
Little Dipper. Hunter Orion's belt.  
They shine unchanged

over this divided capital  
on a divided island  
in our divided world.

Candles and stars  
are easier than news.  
Television announcers describe

the infinite variety  
of bombs. One flattens everything  
in a two-kilometer radius:

libraries, movie theaters, schools.  
Another sucks up acres of oxygen,  
suffocating cats, cows, children.

From Baghdad, Barbara writes of families  
so desperate to get a child out  
they stop any foreigner in the street.

She pleads, "Just imagine our lives."  
Tilting my head to the night sky  
I watch the stars shine calmly

over our small world.  
From wherever we are,  
Baghdad is not so far.

### LIVING IN HISTORY

It's true, whatever we do or don't do may come to haunt us.  
Outside a man walks by: blue shirt, bald head. He blends  
into the dusk, like the olive tree outside my window,  
the blue-gray sky washed clean by recent rain,  
the bird whose twittering heralds the evening.  
May we all fit together like this: trees, birds, sky,  
people, separate elements in a living portrait,  
outlines smoothed by the forgiving wash  
of lingering light. Whatever the skins we live in,  
the names we choose, the gods we claim or disavow,  
may we be like grains of sand on the beach at night:  
a hundred million separate particles  
creating a single expanse on which to lie back  
and study the stars. And may we remember the generosity  
of light: how it travels through unimaginable darkness,  
age after age, to light our small human night.

### CYCLONES AND SEEDS

Headlines declare retaliations,  
military strikes. But in the lanes  
kids bleed in the dust  
while soldiers bar the way  
to ambulances: no passage for mercy.

Love is in the details.  
I want to know what that man,  
twenty-five years old,  
killed at his window  
cradling his daughter in his arms,  
ate for breakfast.  
How many years of saving,  
one dinar at a time,  
it took to build that pile of rubble  
that was once a home.  
If the boy killed by a sniper  
on his way to school  
argued with his mother that morning.  
If the pregnant woman shot at the checkpoint  
was afraid of labor, anemic;  
what she felt when her infant  
turned beneath her heart.  
What that stillborn child might have been named  
if its desperate mother  
had gotten through to the hospital  
ringed with tanks.  
Was it a girl? First born?  
Fifth in a line of sons?

I want to save everything broken,  
 collect shards of crockery  
 from the rubble, gently blot the blood  
 from the gouged-up earth,  
 smooth the lashes that lie like tears  
 on the dead boys' cheeks.  
 I want to count the fingers and toes of each baby  
 before it's tucked into the earth.

I want the killers to look survivors in the eye  
 taste the gore of the dead in their mouths  
 lie down in the dirt with the corpses they've created  
 and remember their own history.  
 I want them to never sleep at night again.

I want the politicians brought before a line-up  
 of one Palestinian child one Israeli child one Afghani child  
 one American child one Iraqi child one British child  
 (all little girls, age four, with neat pigtails,  
 scrubbed faces, large trusting eyes).  
 Let them choose the child with the greatest value.

I want the headlines to scream  
 of Samer Suleiman Abu Mayaleh  
 fourteen years oldstripped  
 pushed face down in the street

soldiers fired one bullet at close range  
 up his rectum  
 it burned through his body  
 penetrating liver, heart  
 blood soaking the dust  
 from veins three quarters drained

they said a heart attack killed the boy

don't tell me you believe them  
 that you hadn't heard  
 that you're too busy to protest  
 that you couldn't do anything anyway  
 that the powers-that-be never listen

so what if we're shouting into a storm  
 if wind swallows words like rain  
 it takes just a single voice to break the silence

the world turns in the night  
 justice will not be silenced



voices planted in darkness  
still spark the wounded earth to light

freedom is a seed a plant a prayer a chant a cyclone

it grows in hard places  
courses through the bones  
like light a song a sound a voice  
a river of voices  
bearing us forward

winged seeds upon the storm