



Selected Poems

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

Lisa Suhair Majaj

Palestinian-American Writer, Scholar and Poet

lmajaj@cytanet.com.cy

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.

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*, *91st 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 21st 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