

WADI ABOU JMIL

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I THE VALLEY

There was a town downhill from the sea.

Travellers described its alleyways as dark and dirty.

They compared its houses with dungeons.

One day, newly introduced political reforms began to generate economic growth.

The place attracted villagers from the mountains, along with persecuted minorities from across the Levant, traders from Europe and missionaries from America.

Its port became the link between the Mediterranean and the hinterlands.

Expanding beyond its medieval walls – southward, eastward and westward –, it evolved into a modern, cosmopolitan city.

On a hill overlooking the old town, the authorities undertook the construction of military barracks. These would later serve as the seat of government.

Below that hill, fields and mulberry groves stretched out across the land.

Along the sides of paved roads, houses, schools and places of worship arose.

Countryside gave birth to a neighbourhood, yet known as ‘the Valley’ – Wadi Abou Jmil.

According to a narrative, a poet imprisoned in the barracks had lent his name to the area.

Another chronicle attributes the designation to a Jewish merchant from Iran or from Damascus who had acquired a plot of land, just west of the medieval gate.

Whatever the case, the Valley had evolved into what was known to be the Jewish quarter.

II WAR

War embraced the city; the same way death seduces the maiden in that sinister German Renaissance painting.

Once the 'Paris of the East', the city became the hub of sorrow.

Children weren't playing in the streets anymore.

Kids erected barricades and stood at checkpoints, abducting passersby who didn't share their way of praising divinity.

Kids went on crusades. They knocked on the doors of the 'others' and asked them to leave.

'This is not your home anymore!' they told them.

A handicapped man of British descent refused to obey.

The new landlord got rid of him by sending brutes to his apartment. It is alleged that they threw him in his wheelchair from the balcony, before the eyes of his wife and children.

'If they come with arms, we will defend our homes with arms', proclaimed the most tenacious.

One day, kids approached the property of renowned fur dealers, in order to install a piece of artillery on the roof.

The fur dealers blocked the entrance.

So, the kids conveyed the piece of artillery to the front of the building and opened fire.

The building and its inhabitants went up in flames.

Ultimately, thousands migrated from north to south, east to west and vice versa.

Newcomers moved into all kinds of spaces – wasteland, schools, hotels, beach resorts, factories, office buildings, cinemas and flats – thus trading places with their counterparts from the opposite side who had just fled.

In a last attempt to hold on to what was home, some exiles dialled their own numbers to find out whether someone would answer.

– What do you want?

– What are you doing in this house?

– It's our house from now on.

III RUINS

A façade had been riddled by hundreds of machine-gun bullets and other projectiles in recurrent rounds of shelling. There were so many holes that the wall looked like a pattern composed by a particularly sophisticated logarithm.

The opposite façade didn't exist anymore. The edifice displayed its entrails like an anatomic diagram.

A woman was seated in a metallic armchair under the porch:

'I live here', she said. 'This is my house. I left during the war. I came back. The landlord won't repair it, and I have nowhere else to go.'

The woman inhabited a wreck that, only yesteryear, had been a comely residence.

Two years later, no one was there.

Had the woman gone out? Had she left? Had she died?

After another two years, the ruin had vanished.

The only trace it had left was a rectangular, yellow and white mark – à la Rothko – on the wall of the adjacent building.

During the same period, other abandoned dwellings met the same fate.

According to a local, all of them had belonged to one wealthy and well-known family.

One villa remained in the deplorable condition it was left to once the Lebanese Army had evacuated it.

Although full of disgusting, stinking garbage and covered by graffiti, it was inhabited by Kirsten Dunst, or, more accurately, her image.

The nearby hairdresser had fixed a poster on one of the patio walls – an advert for a French cosmetics and beauty company depicting the German actress, singer and model.

IV RECONSTRUCTION

There were old-fashioned cafés whose wooden structures stood over the sea.

The cafes burned with the rest of the city.

Dozens of trucks started to throw the city's garbage into the bay.

Garbage was melted with sand, in cake-like layers, and the bay was filled to create a mound.

They promised the newly-gained land would allow for the creation of public gardens and a leisure promenade.

Growing over the years, the bank was given the name of a French region, after a neighbouring hotel that had been destroyed.

When fighting was halted, the mound that symbolised the miseries of war grew even more, acquiring rubble from demolitions (including those from the Valley), as well as archaeological debris.

Then came the reconstruction process.

The pile of rubble and garbage was an opportunity for wealth, providing invaluable real estate properties: glitzy skyscrapers, luxury hotels, and fancy marinas.

They erased the shoreline.

They erased the memories of the old-fashioned cafés.

They even erased the traces of war.

V THE WITNESS

Expelled from home, a toddler came to the Valley with his family.
He grew up there.
He witnessed war.
He witnessed ruins.
He witnessed reconstruction.
'Every building is emptied of its inhabitants.
Then, every façade is veiled – hidden.
Each building is emptied of its entrails. It is a patient in an operating room
or the dead body in Rembrandt's Anatomy Lecture.
All the components are expelled through barrels, as though from stomachs.
Next, the veiled façade disappears for good.
Annihilation is surgical and systematic.
The last inhabitant is enclosed, not by a fence but rather a void.
Everyday, the void expands around him.
Then, he is expelled himself and disappears.
The building he grew up in disappears.
Finally, there is nothing left – everything disappears in the end.'

Based on “Le chantier” series
executed in Beirut between 2000 and 2001.
This work was printed in Berlin, on Velin d’Arches paper,
in an edition of 24 copies, 20 numbered
and 4 Artist’s Proof E.A.

This copy has the number



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