

POEMS WOVEN FROM A SACRED THREAD:
AN INTERVIEW WITH NATHALIE HANDAL

More than most English-language poets living in the United States, Nathalie Handal's poetry possesses a global consciousness. Informed by her rich and varied ethnic heritage (French-American of Palestinian parents from Bethlehem, born in Haiti, and whose family now resides in Latin America), and by her identification with the Palestinian Diaspora, this consciousness is made manifest by a sustained lyric intensity, which, though often passionate, is masterfully controlled. A frequent world traveler ("It's only when I am moving and can catch my *longings* that I feel whole"), the discussion below demonstrates Handal's ability to center herself and find "home" in the moment, wherever she may be. She has earned many honors and fellowships, including a 2011 Gold Medal for the Independent Publisher Book Award, a 2011–12 Lannan Foundation Fellowship, the 2011 Alejo Zuloaga Order in Literature Award, the 2006 Mendana Literary Award, and the 2002 Pen Oakland/ Josephine Miles National Book Award. Currently a professor at Columbia University and part of the MFA Faculty at Sierra Nevada College, she also lectures internationally, recently in Africa and as Picador Guest Professor, Leipzig University, Germany.

In his blurb for Love and Strange Horses, Yusef Komunyakaa writes that your "cosmopolitan voice belongs to the human family." In reading the book, I would agree that there are a number of ways in which your poems transcend a national consciousnesses and in so doing cross both geographical and ideological borders. Could you discuss some of the ways in which you see your poems doing this?

The simple act of writing a poem transcends boundaries. That is what art does: it places the specifics of our experience into a wider context. Our story, then, is not limited to a geographical or historical context

but becomes a global one, a human one. My experience has been one of borders—Palestine/Israel; Haiti/Dominican Republic; France/United States. Today these borders don't exist in my mind in that they are no longer fragments but part of one thread, weaving together what might seem unweavable. All the different images I have grown up with strangely and beautifully coexist inside of me. And of course, multiple languages inhabit my pages, and as grammatically and rhythmically varied as they are, they find their way together to create a different type of movement and music.

You seem determined to place your work in the context of world literature. One of the more obvious ways you do this is through the numerous citations to world poets throughout your work. In Love and Strange Horses alone, you refer to Anna Akhmatova, St. Augustine, Jorge Luis Borges, Constantine Cavafy, Mahmoud Darwish, François Jacmin, Ingrid Jonker, Federico García Lorca, Louis MacNeice, Amado Nervo, Octavio Paz, Fernando Pessoa, Yannis Ritsos, and Voltaire. And there are probably others I've missed. Not only is this a long list, but these writers are quite different from one another for a number of reasons. How do they come together through you?

These poets are cited in the book because I felt connected to their work at one point or another. I did not think, "this one is South American," or "this one is Greek." Poetry converses and is inclusive—eliminating whatever marginalizes us or defines us rigidly. In terms of their aesthetic differences, although there are writers I constantly return to, I read widely. If a line by one of these poets comes to mind or finds itself on my pages while I am writing, I allow it. Why not?

Do you see yourself as someone in search of a home or as a citizen of the world?

I'm a citizen of the world. But mainly, I'm a poet and on the page "nation" does not exist in a geographical sense. Home is where I am at the moment. It is wherever my parents are. And it is also where I return to—Bethlehem, Paris, New York. Home always comes back to me, even when I think I've lost it.

In your poem "In January, Amor y Lluvia," you write, "I would never abandon Darwish." Although you cite and allude to a range of poets from varying

geographies and historical periods, you seem especially connected to Mahmoud Darwish. Could you take some time to reflect upon the many ways he influences your work?

I met Mahmoud Darwish in my early twenties while he was in exile in Paris. Until then, his was the only work I could go back to in order to help me understand the empty mountain inside of me, help me understand my contradictions and my experience as a Palestinian—of being between here and there, of knowing a place so deeply yet not knowing how to belong to it as I am told I should. Soon after we met, I started writing for his journal, *Al-Karmel*, one of the most important in the Arab world. He gave me my first interview assignment: none other than Allen Ginsberg—who admired Darwish. It was a monumental moment for me. The night before I interviewed Ginsberg, he wrote "Fame & Death," and he died a month or so afterwards. It took me a while to understand the experience. I don't even remember what I wrote as an introduction because I don't think Ginsberg can be properly introduced and I wasn't mature enough to understand his complexities. My encounter with him took me to uncomfortable places and heightened my curiosity about everything. My questions became deeper, more layered. When Darwish died, I started writing about this crossing. It took more than a decade for me to understand the encounter the three of us had.

I don't remember ever not reading Darwish. I asked him endless questions about writing and Palestine along the years. His answers almost always surprised me. He had a way of answering in metaphors. In fact, his answers could have been poems. Our discussions on literature were also important to me, his thoughts on the works of Walcott, Tranströmer, Lorca, Paz. But mostly, he helped me see that there are pieces of the emptiness that can become worlds, and those worlds can become books, and those books can become monuments, and those monuments can represent hope. And if not hope, they can at least be the start of a conversation.

In the epigraph to Love and Strange Horses, you "return" to Darwish by citing one of his poems. Images of abandonment and return are central to your work. Can you comment on this?

Returning is a way of staying. Which also means a way of leaving. It is a way of accepting. Which also means a way of questioning. It is a way of existing. Which also means a way of resisting.

For me, there is only a symbolic return. You can never really return to anything, whether it's a lover or a homeland. Inevitably, where you return has changed. However, the act of returning is important even if disillusioning, because you don't find the exactness you imagined.

On a recent trip to Haiti, a woman who knew my mother screamed my name when she saw me. She greeted me warmly and was delighted to see me. I, on the other hand, didn't remember her. I was too young when I saw her last. She spoke to me as if we had crossed yesterday. As if she knew me. For her, 25 years had not passed. For me, it had. It isn't that she hadn't changed during that time, it's that she continued to exist in the same social and cultural context, in the same ambience, so the fundamentals had not moved. I, on the other hand, exist in many other spaces. She didn't know all the colors on my canvas. She assumed the colors she knew were the only ones that defined me. This is not uncommon when one belongs to many different cultural spaces.

People only refer to you from their point of reference. You can never fully satisfy everyone because each person has his or her version of you. Hopefully, one day, if they really want to know the *whole you*, they will go beyond their definitions and will discover.

The incident in Haiti was an extreme situation because I constantly navigate all the places I belong to—France, Latin America, and the Middle East. In the case of Palestine, I never cease returning or perhaps I should say cease *trying to return to* that Palestine, and in particular that Bethlehem, that my soul is so deeply anchored in. Though it is not there. The land is there. It hasn't moved. But my Bethlehem is not there. The land has been cut into pieces, the wall imprisons even shadows. This experience of presence and absence is incredibly disturbing. So returning is freedom and imprisonment. In other words, returning is in many ways unattainable but we never stop trying. In most of my poems, *return* lingers somewhere on the page, between or underneath the words.

You are the editor of The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology and coeditor of Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from the Middle East, Asia, and Beyond. What were your reasons for embarking on both of these equally important and ambitious projects? What are some of the lessons you learned in compiling both of the anthologies?

I believe in the transformative power of the word. It informs and, in so doing, helps us understand different worlds, cultures, realities, and what we might fear in others. With less than three percent of literature in translation and having an international background, I feel an immense duty to participate in translation projects and the dissipation of global literature. Literature is dialogue. I want to be part of that conversation not only as a writer but also as a literary activist.

When I started the *Poetry of Arab Women*, I did not know what I was doing. I certainly did not know the massive amount of work it required, and thankfully so—I might have been discouraged. It was an education at so many levels. When I left the United States for Paris in 1992, I started to work more with the Arab world, and I soon realized that Arab women writers were marginalized in Arabic literature and the Arab literary scene. I also knew that in the United States, Arab-American women authors were one of the most invisible groups in the American literary circle. At the same time, Arab women writers were virtually unknown to Arab-Americans and Americans in general, and vice versa. So it became vital for me to give birth to this project in order to eradicate invisibility, introduce Arab women poets and show the diversity of Arab women's poetry. It was equally essential to unite these Arab women poets regardless of what language they wrote in and whether they were born in the Arab world or not. It was also important to write a substantial introduction on Arab women's literature and to highlight the particularities of every Arab country. So my "Introduction" presents the feminist movement, the women's literary scene, the poetic commonalities and differences between these poets as well as the political and social contexts that surround them.

So much has changed now. I am currently editing the ten-year anniversary edition of this book, and I do everything via e-mail, for example.

People are connected via the web, and other social networks. It is a completely different landscape. When I was working on the first edition, I was like a detective, a hunter, trying to gather books, permission slips. It was a real adventure. I remember asking a friend in Tunis via letter or phone to kindly help me make sure one of the poets signs and mails her permission slip. I found out afterwards that she drove two hours to the countryside to get that signature. I would have never asked if I knew it was going to be such an imposition. To her, it was normal. This is an example of Arab generosity.

Language for a New Century was conceived following the events of September 11, 2001. Taiwanese-American poet Tina Chang, Indian-American poet Ravi Shankar, and I felt a deep solidarity between ourselves and others of Eastern descent. We felt troubled by the negative views showcased in the media about the East. We did not have solutions for what was going on nor could we explain or define the East so rigidly, but we felt a deep need to respond in any way we could. So we went to what we knew best, our natural prayer: poetry. We went to the human voices that have enchanted us and changed our lives and spirits, in hopes of adding to the ongoing dialogue between East and West.

I am currently working on an ambitious project of Dominican poetry in translation and started the blog-column *The City and the Writer for Words without Borders*, which I enjoy immensely, as it allows me to connect more deeply with the cities I am traveling to.

I was rather surprised when reading Love and Strange Horses how involved your understanding is of the breadth of locales and cultures. In the poems (and I'm assuming this is, rightly or wrongly, a mirror of your life) you move rather fluently between borders: the opening poem, "Pasaje," centers on a town in Ecuador; "In the Ruins" cites Lorca and Darwish; "Pendule" and "Scènes dans une Chambre Mauve" indicate a French sensibility; "Lubhyati: Love Letters" an intimacy with the Arabic world. Could you talk about this fluidity of movement in terms of the physical and intellectual?

This is the reality I know. What might seem unusual to others is natural to me. I grew up eating at a table where everyone spoke the language they were most comfortable in and we all understood one another. The conversation moved along coherently and smoothly even

if the back and forth was in various languages. As a writer, I hope I have created my own English, one that comes from many cultures but despite its vast differences—culturally, musically, rhythmically, grammatically—coexists and creates its own music on the page. I am also used to family members being from different parts of the world but what unifies us is our Palestinian background, and that sacred thread is powerful, and perhaps unbreakable.

What is this sacred thread?

It is that force that is impenetrable, whose root is family, tradition, and homeland. When I think of my family history, it is deeply inspiring because it tells me that love can endure anything—history and war, death and time. When I say love, I mean that greater power which encompasses all associated to family, such as language, culture, place. My Bethlehemite family is spread all over the world, from Asia to Australia, Latin America to the Caribbean, Europe to the Middle East. Yet, we have found a way to stay connected and profoundly entrenched to where we are originally from. Maybe that's why I believe, if you have lost your home along the way, it will find you again.

Many of your new poems concentrate on erotic themes and the politics of the bedroom. In the wonderful serial poem, "Love and Strange Horses—Intima," you claim, "I suppose we need evidence of desire— / to have a heart broken in this dangerous world; / evidence that we belonged somewhere once." If we're lucky, desire strips away differences and brings us closer together: "He came toward me . . . And we listened to the untitled music / circling the earth like an anthem / free of its nation."

It is less about the politics of the bedroom and more about what is revealed to us in intimacy. Everything vanishes when we are intimate—our politics, society, morals and ideologies. That should make us question the things we allow to restrain and confine us.

I think the heart is purer than we are. It breaks down our walls. It denudes us, takes us to a sort of birth and there we are free, even of ourselves.

What do you mean, "free of ourselves"?

We constantly have to negotiate our social boundaries. And we might be a victim of a political situation, a certain circumstance or person, but nothing or no one can imprison our spirit. Only we can do that to ourselves. When I say, “free of ourselves,” I mean free of the limitations we have imposed on ourselves, the walls we have built around us, visible or invisible. Free of what’s within us that halts us, and prevents us from being all that we can be.

In “History by Candlelight,” you restate and extend the same theme: “we held each other / and turned the small humming / of furious beats deep in the heart / into who we are meant to be.” Such coming together may even be powerful enough, as it is in “Intermisión,” to dismantle previous ways of knowing the world: “a feeling shivering electric / on the flesh, the fever of what / I no longer know.” Are such lessons and revelations fairly radical for a woman with cultural ties to parts of the Arab world, where expressing the liberating powers of desire could be fatal?

Every society and culture has its limitations and restrictions. There are also extremists in every part of the world. I feel free to write whatever I want. That does not mean I will read some of my more erotic poems to a conservative Arab audience just like I wouldn’t read them to a conservative Catholic audience in Texas. That seems logical to me. Otherwise, it’s nothing but provocation. This act is not self-censoring; it’s simply a more constructive way to open a conversation.

I particularly admired “Javier,” the seven-part prose poem that centers the collection. The poem begins by establishing a passionate connection between two lovers that not-so-slowly devolves into desperate attempts to keep that passion alive. It’s such an honest, unsentimental poem. I was wondering if you might discuss some of your reasons for writing it.

I am interested in what keeps us apart while we are together. Those details are so telling, they are worlds yet we often dismiss them. How do we stay together, continue to trust, to love, and most of all, see each other. How do we eliminate the noise, reconcile with ourselves, our truths, what disconnects us, what myths do we create? It is an intimate and a collective rumination.

Is “Javier,” then, emblematic of intimate relationships or more a rumination on a particular relationship? Is the trajectory of the couple’s story a personal reflection or a metaphor for all such relationships?

It’s not only a metaphor of such relationships but of life; of not paying attention to the details, the life-beats around us. Of forgetting that in each breath, there is a universe. We are often so preoccupied with wanting more, that we never actually take the time to see, listen, sing.

In “Love and Strange Horses—Intima,” you write, “to confess something sacred / to name something lustful . . .” The parallel structure of these lines suggests a yoking of the sacred and secular passions. Can our carnal desires bring us salvation?

When we are free to live and manifest, that saves us. I once met someone from Bethlehem who fell in love with someone from Jerusalem. It grew increasingly difficult for them to see each other despite the fact that the two places have always been sister-cities. A Bethlehemite cannot live in Jerusalem and if a Jerusalemite (Palestinian) moves to Bethlehem he or she will lose his or her ID card. Over there, even love is occupied. On the day before her wedding to another man, he decided in spite of everything, he couldn’t lose her, so he headed to Bethlehem. En route, Israeli soldiers detained him. They detected that he was nervous and unsettled, therefore suspicious. He never made it to Bethlehem. He told me, “If I said, ‘I was trying to reach my love.’ Who would have believed me?”

Throughout Love and Strange Horses, I see repeated images that exploit tensions between proximity and distance, as well as presence and absence. Can you talk about such tensions as you see them at work in your poems?

The closer we get, the farther away we are because we realize at that moment that the return is different than we imagined it to be. Yet, we continue to pursue the closeness because we want something of what’s passed. Perhaps there is no closeness nor is there distance, they merge somehow. Often we are closer in the distance. The same with absence and presence—we are often more present in absence, more absent in our presence. The poems flirt with these notions in an attempt to be close to closeness, to absence, to distance, to *this* present.

I loved the poem "Akhmatova and I: Boleros." What prompted this poem? It seems like there's a great story behind it.

I have always been drawn to her. And I have always felt connected to Russia's melancholic side. My mother is an avid reader and all of her children have names from Russian novels. Once while in St. Petersburg, Phillip Lopate was giving a reading at The Literary and Memorial Museum of Anna Akhmatova. During his reading, I heard her voice in the distance. She was singing. Of course, I don't know her voice nor do I know if she sang. But by the end of the evening I felt very strongly that she was telling me, *don't stay in the past*. The last line of the poem, when she asks me, "have you ever danced a bolero?" is intended to be a surprise question; you are not prepared to think about it, question it or try to understand it, you just trust it and go with it. That's what I felt that evening. I trusted the encounter. That night, Lopate suggested I leave Europe and come to New York. A year later, I did. I think that changed the course of my writing life. Akhmatova's *Selected Poems* is placed on my bookshelf where I can see her.

Formally, the poems in Love and Strange Horses are shaped by your knowledge of various rhetorical strategies common to Arab literature, as well as aesthetics shaped by American, Hispanic, and French literatures. Moreover, the book is structured in musical movements, a fact that is further reinforced by references to instruments throughout.

Music has always been important to me. It is not bound to nationality while being rooted in the tradition of a place. When an instrument stands alone, it's quiet. When a hand is in contact with it, they create music together. The image of the hand on wood, brass, ivory creating sound is powerful to me. But I also began to listen to the quietness, and slowly started hearing it. When I listen to music, I see people, places, phantoms. I wanted to see what those images in my mind, inspired by music, looked like on the page.

Many of the poems in The Lives of Rain involve dramatically poignant moments of arrival and departure. Such moments are often heightened by a speaker's complicated sense of identification with the place he or she arrives at or leaves. Could you talk about themes of arrival and departure in this book?

I am always arriving somewhere, and while arriving, I am already departing; always departing and while departing, arriving—to that place which is not arrival or departure. It is unnamed but it belongs to me. It's undefined and the most defined inside of me. In that place there is no exit because neither arrival nor departure exists. It's my version of infinity. The perfect symphony. It transcends everything that binds.

You speak of that place the way one might speak of the power of a poem? Is it through poetry that you find such places?

Yes, poetry has that transcendental quality. It is everywhere at once. Everything is alive and immortal in a poem even when the speaker or the character in the poem is dying. In poetry, death finds a way to live.

Another motif in The Lives of Rain is the frequent recurrence of the word "between," which is used in several contexts—some literal, others metaphorical. Even in poems where the word does not appear, the notion of the self as being between two worlds or two states of mind is prevalent in these poems. Could you talk about this?

In between is a country. A place not everyone finds or feels comfortable in but in that discomfort there are illuminations. My life has been filled with longings. It's consoling to be in between, on my way to another place I miss. It's too painful to accept that although I can unite all of my worlds in my work, I cannot in my reality.

You conclude the poem "Bethlehem" by saying an old man "has left me secrets between his footsteps." Not only is this a powerful way of circling back to the opening line about the persona's grandfather, it seems an apt metaphor for the function of the poems in The Lives of Rain. Each poem is, in a sense, a secret between the complex, outer realities on a global and personal scale. Do you see your poems functioning in this way?

I see the poems as bridges gathering messages. Asking readers to listen to what is unsaid.

Most likely if I wrote this poem today, I would not have used the word *secret*. This was the title poem of a book edited by Naomi Shihab Nye and published by Simon & Schuster. It was in the early to mid-90s and

the word Palestine wasn't as frequently used in the United States as it is today. During my undergraduate studies in Boston, saying I am Palestinian was problematic to many, and at times, I was made to feel afraid. It was very unsettling. After 9/11 people in the United States were forced to become aware of who Arabs and Muslims are as well as the history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. I try to understand what lies beyond what I hear and what I am told, what I see and what I am taught. I've learned the more I know, the less afraid I am. We constantly focus on difference yet there are so many more commonalities.

In "Strangers Inside Me" you write "a tiny echo is calling me / as I travel and move / from one continent to the next, / move, to be whole."

It's only when I am moving and can catch my *longings* that I feel whole. It's unbearable to think about all the places and people I miss, all scattered around the globe. Obviously, I cannot be with all of them at the same time. So movement consoles me. It makes me feel like I'm constantly moving towards them. It gives me the illusion that I never left, that I am simply in a perpetual state of circular motion.

Another recurring image/reference is to the importance of memory and remembering.

Only when we remember can we start accepting and repenting, and from that point, begin changing, evolving. We have to stand in front of the broken mirror, look at how and where it's broken before the cracks can start to vanish.

Tell me a little about the poem "Amrika," from The Lives of Rain.

In many ways it is a memoir-poem. It goes through all the places that have been an integral part of my journey: Palestine, France, Haiti, Boston, Miami, the Dominican Republic, London, and New York. But at the heart of the poem is exile. What it means to be displaced. I wanted to unite worlds within worlds. And it was important to use the Arabic word for America to echo the experience of exiles and immigrants; that's where they went, but that's not who they are. But also to demonstrate the contradictions associated to leaving ones homeland: the other place is a blessing and a curse, a joy and a profound sadness.

Tell me about The Neverfield. Do you see this as a series of small, untitled poems or as one epic poem?

The Neverfield is an epic poem. I was obsessed with mythology and folklore. I was also trying to articulate my journey. A life moving. Fields have always seduced me, especially the endless yellow fields I have seen in France, Palestine, and, yes, Iowa. I remember driving from Fairfield to Des Moines, and at one juncture could not tell the difference between the sky and the field. It was a real spiritual experience. And at the time, the Sufis really influenced me—the idea of oneness. I was on a continuous search. I still am, but I am searching for something different now. Then, I kept arriving but never arrived.

I hear you have a new book coming out called Poet in Andalucía. By the time this interview is released in book form, your new volume of poetry will be a few months old. I'd welcome any general comments about it.

Federico García Lorca lived in Manhattan from 1929 to 1930, and the poetry he wrote about the city, *Poet in New York*, was posthumously published in 1940. Now, 80 years after Lorca's sojourn in America, and myself a poet in New York of Mediterranean as well as Middle Eastern roots, I went to Spain to write *Poet in Andalucía*.

I recreated Lorca's journey in reverse.

Andalucía has always been the place where racial, ethnic, and religious forces converge and contend, where Islamic, Judaic, and Christian traditions remain a mirror of a past that is terrible and beautiful. *Poet in Andalucía* is a meditation on the past and the present. It is a voyage, cultural and personal, historical and creative. It renders in poetry a region that seems to hold the pulse of our earth, where all of our stories assemble. It is a meditation on what has changed and what insists on remaining the same, on the mysteries that trouble and intrigue us. It is about a poet who continues to call us to question what makes us human. Lorca left as part of his legacy a longing for homeland. My own longing stretches across four continents, due to a life made exilic by the political turmoil in the Middle East. His poems were about discovering a lost self. The poems in *Poet in Andalucía* confront that same loss, and resonate with that same yearning for a sustaining place. Richard

L. Predmore writes that *Poet in New York* is about “social injustice, dark love and lost faith,” and the quality of otherness such forces produce. *Poet in Andalucía* explores the persistent tragedy of otherness but it also acknowledges a refusal to remain in that stark darkness, and it searches for the possibility of human coexistence.

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