

The seeds of The Myrtle Tree were sown in the early eighties, when the civil war was still raging in Lebanon and I was working in Greece. Looking back, I think the similarities between Lebanon and Greece - music, food, mood, and of course landscape and light - must have been crucial to the germination of this tree. I can remember one incident in particular. I was with my family, spending the week-end in a tiny village that had no hotels and no tourists, just one taverna and a bunch of fishermen who argued loudly for half an hour before deciding in whose house we were to sleep.

An early riser since I was born (at four in the morning,) I tiptoed from the little room with the first coq-crow of dawn. I was hoping to be at the port before the fishermen sailed, and perhaps go with them to draw or throw the nets. I had enough Greek to get by and a naïve conviction that people find it hard to say no to a bold stranger. I hoped to bring back a story for my family and a few fish to go with it.

At the port I learned that the fishermen had already gone. An old man was sitting drinking ouzo and nibbling feta cheese; both food and drink were as white as his thick mustache. He kindly beckoned me to join him. We conversed in a mixture of Greek and French. He had no English, but had picked up some French during his boating years in Marseille. We didn't have much to say to each other, but we chatted anyway watching a glorious burgundy sun rising from the dark purple sea. North of the port, just a few meters from the water, there was a wide olive grove. It was so close to the waves I imagined them washing the tree trunks during high seas. Ancient, stubborn in their rooting, yet patient and generous, the Greek olive trees were exactly the same as those I'd known in my native Lebanese village. I

loved those trees - their big hearts and their robust bodies. They give without asking much in return. They survive the harsh winters and the gruelling summers with the same stoicism as the rocks on the highest peaks. Whether you neglect them or tend them, they carry on giving. We can hug and kiss an olive tree, we can sleep in its shade or climb up it and feign invisibility, and when the autumn comes and every other tree has exhausted its offerings, the olive tree comes into its own and gives us the basics of survival : oil that feeds and warms us and used to light up our nights; soap that cleans us and our children, and the fruit that sustains us even if we have nothing else to eat.

My drinking companion noticed my pondering of the grove. He said, 'Two hundred years ago those trees were planted on the slope further up, but they wanted to come closer to the sea.'

'Why?' I asked

'Because with age they became hard of hearing and were missing the fishermen's songs,' said the man, laughing.

In reality, he then explained, there had been a land-slide that pushed the whole grove to the foot of the Mediterranean without even one tree being uprooted.

Both versions of the story appealed to me: the trees as audience to the fishermen's songs and as a symbol of tenacity. It stirred my own memories of olive groves and olive harvest. I told the old man by the sea about the sunny days between mid-October and mid- December when our Indian summer ushered in the right weather for the olive harvest, when we ran home after school to help gathering the crop. Then he looked me straight in the eye. 'Are you thinking of going back to Lebanon?' he asked.

'Of course. When the war is over.'

'Your country is a volcano, *pedimou*, my little one. You never know when it will erupt next. '

His voice still echoes in my mind.

During those years, I couldn't stay away from Lebanon for more than three or four months at the most. No matter how dangerous the situation I kept braving it, as if I had a sick child in the jungle, unable to move him out but longing to see him. Our airport had been crippled, so I travelled by sea. From any boat approaching the Lebanese shores one could discern the pale bluish olive groves creeping close to the fishermen's songs.

Then one day I was browsing a history book in Athens and saw a drawing of Venus wreathed with myrtle branches. The caption said that myrtle was a sacred emblem of love in Hellenic mythology. That image brought back to my memory the myrtle tree in our olive grove where we used to play hide and seek and where our parents and relatives sat to eat lunch during the olive harvest. I also remembered a picture of Ashtar from my history text- book, her head wreathed with the same thin green stems dotted in white cottony flowers.

It was mid-summer 1983. That day I went back home and began writing about a remote Lebanese village ready to start its olive harvest and hoping that the civil war would leave it alone. I gave it the title *the Green and the Dry* from the proverb for complete destruction stemming from the famine of WW1 when a locust plague caused the worst starvation in Lebanon's history. Thus *hoovering the green and the dry* became the symbol for every major disaster.

It took me five years to write *The Green and the Dry*. It was published in Australia in 1988.

In the years following its publication, I made several failed attempts to rewrite or translate the story where the beauty is the land and the beast is the war. The story of Wahdeh, the idyllic village that represented the spirit of every Lebanese village at its best and worst. It was neither Christian nor Muslim. It was Lebanese inside and out. I strived at this aspect to convey the common particularities of those people who still lived close to the land, still worked it and still believed in it as the main source of life. Their songs and dance and cuisine, sure, but also the morals they lived by and most importantly the symbolic similarity of their attachment to it with that of olive and myrtle trees. Another of my goals was to inject my story with every proverb, anecdote and folk tradition of the Lebanese mountain, for fear that the civil war would wipe out that ancient and precious world.

But it wasn't until I immigrated back to Lebanon in 1997 that I could embark on writing a brand new novel in English, based loosely on *The Green and the Dry*. There, from my mountain retreat, it was like deep sea diving to retrieve a treasure from a drowned ship. The crucial challenge was finding ways to convey in English the spirit of tradition and a verbal heritage loaded with songs and sayings and proverbs. In Arabic, all I had to do was lay them down on the page where they stemmed naturally from the flow of the story. Easy. But try saying *ta'berni*, translated *bury me* in English, and watch the eyebrows of your reader wrinkle. All I could say in the glossary was that *ta'berni*, is an expression of endearment. Is that enough? Of course not. The reader has to do a little homework. Think of the English, *You kill me*, as an idiom of affectionate declaration. It may or may

not carry the right sense once translated into, say, Japanese where *kill* is wholly negative. But if I Anglicised those expressions, how much of the local colour would be lost? And how much damage would be done to the text?

Nevertheless, sometimes a word for word translation of a Lebanese proverb shines like a miracle in English.. For example, '*He walked over to Nimer and pulled him out of his flock like a hair from a ball of dough.*' This saying reflects the way something difficult is nevertheless achieved with uncanny ease. Having it preserved verbatim felt like shipping an exotic flower across the world while successfully preserving its fragrance and its freshness. Being able to transcreate the colloquial poetry called *Zajal* was another, even more satisfying, experience. I managed to emulate the rhyme, the images, and the metrics of a verbal tradition as old as the land itself, so that they can be sung in English to the same Arabic melody.

Perhaps best of all, though, are the moments in the novel when English speaking friends have expressed genuine empathy with a character or situation. It feels like: well done, the message is delivered. I hope so. And I hope those of you who may go on to read the TMT will feel the same. Thank you.