

## The Last Migration, a novel of diaspora and love

Ladies and Gentlemen, good evening and thank you for attending this function this evening. I would also like to thank the Lebanese Emigration Research Centre for its efforts in shedding light on the Lebanese diaspora. A bridge is being built through this young organization between the Lebanese immigrants scattered across the Globe, and the homeland that has seen them sailing away since time immemorial. For whether we bemoan their departure, more often than not under the duress of war and poverty, or we feel pride at their achievements overseas, this land of milk and honey has veins connected to the sea. It would be rare to find a single Lebanese family today without relatives behind the horizon. In this respect, it seems that our small country had practiced globalization, long before the word was coined. Once again, as our great bard Said Akl might put it; we were the first globalizers!

I, for instance was brought up in a French-based environment, even learned the history and geography of France in my early years of school. But my first attempts at writing were mostly in Arabic, except for love letters when I used Lamartine's language for better effect. But things were never either black or white. There were always grey areas, and sometimes colorful ones, like those escaping school altogether. I never thrived in communal confinement, physical, mental, or emotional. I learned mainly from teachers who had dedication and love; who didn't resort to the rod to enforce learning. And teachers who were happy when they spotted talent, and made the talented feel privileged and special. They were few, but they taught me and later became my friends. One of them, seventy-something years old, still wore the red Turkish fez, waxed his mustache up at the corners, and lined his eyes with kohl. He also used the thin pomegranate sticks to control us. This man, who still shadows my days, particularly when I'm writing, was not only responsible for my love of words; he showed me the way to tame them. Words, he used to say, are rough, wild, and your pen should practice polishing them and making them shine. If you learn this art you can be sure of having a future. His name was Philip Yazbek. Unfortunately I only had him for three years. When he retired I cried my eyes out, and refused to go back to the same school. So it was a recurring trauma for my father to change schools for me. But Ustaz Philip never tired of following my steps in the

craft of words. His nephew, a few years later, told me: your teacher is reading your weird poetry and your articles in the papers; I think you should go and see him... The old man had never married. Teaching was his whole life. He lived alone in a two-room flat. When I saw him, with his white jellabia, fezless head and thinning body, I felt an incredible jolt as if all the whips on my palms from his wicked sticks had come back, and his croaky voice resounded in my ears: Hage! Approach the altar (that's what he called his wooden stand). Then he unsheathed his green whip and gave me one on each hand just to save me from the demons of reverie during his grueling grammar lessons. But that day in his tiny and tidy room I discovered the meaning of devotion and the amazing extent of passion that man had. He'd kept almost everything I'd published in Annahar and Lissan El Hal. My first pompous poems together with my pretentious articles. It wasn't their content that worried him, that was my concern, but language; my tricksie and fussy usages of Arabic. He'd corrected them just as he did in school. Moreover he told me how saddened he'd felt about my drifting and my itchy feet. For after his retirement I changed schools every year throughout my secondary education until I became a cunning consultant to students unhappy with their schools.

I was fourteen when I'd exhausted every educational institution in a thirty klm radius. The only remaining school was run by evangelical Palestinians. Its second language was English. A whole new world was opened to me that year. And it happened not through an inspiring teacher but a word. One word in my first book of English: wizard. I'd known by then that I was infatuated with words but I was under the false impression that only words in Arabic or French would give me goose bumps. The future proved me wrong. Not only did the English 'wizard' play delightful tricks with my imagination and stir my hunger for more magic, but words from other languages all over the world were being considered carefully by my ear's jeweler. Some sparkled ever after in my memory, others sank into oblivion. I remember vividly picking at the letter 'P' pronounced 'B' by most Palestinians, students and teachers alike, and the little secret pride I felt at beating them all to the right 'P'.

To say that I learned English in that school would be like saying I spoke mandarin after watching the Bruce Lee movies, but I learned to read properly and a bit of grammar.

After that, my whole education went out of control. My rebellious nature, fuelled by fantasies of being a poet, made me plunge into reading fervently, sometimes throughout the night. Except for school books. My grandfather who was a self-taught pharmacist, photographer and painter gave me *The Arabian Nights*, Omar Khayam, and *Robinson Crusoe* in English. With dictionary and passion I learned enough to engage in conversation, enough to write love letters to my first English girl friends. Yes, I'm happy to say that in those years when having a girl friend was frowned upon, I was blessed with not only one but four on the row. Our neighbors were an English couple working for the UN. They brought a new au-pair girl each year to look after their children, so I au-paired the visitor with all my heart, learning more English from the source.

The sixties brought another spell of contact with English. The world seemed to be changing in those years. For me it felt like surfing on a sky-high wave. I had relatives in Los Angeles who sent me underground newspapers, Bob Dylan's songs and poetry by Allen Ginsburg. Anarchy and beauty walked hand in hand for me. Soon I wasn't only learning to 'groove' and be 'cool' and 'far out' but I was burning to cause tremors in the stagnant, conventional Lebanese society. I founded the 'LA' movement, vaguely inspired by the famous Greek OXI. It said no to the confessional divide, and called on the students to unite against the corrupt establishment. Ironically the first manifesto of the 'LA,' dated November 68, still reads *a la page* today; proof of the stubborn stagnation I innocently tried to smash in the sixties. I was arrested of course. The smart Second Bureau decided not to make a hero out of me. So, after a week of psychological and moral torture they released me, then dispatched one of their soft spoken-men to convince me to leave the country. At the time, I had already started freelancing for Annahar. I had lost my father to cancer and my mother had five other mouths to feed and teach. Being the eldest I was supposed to help her instead of dragging her to prison every day with sandwiches and sweets for the whole garrison. After my arrest, having heard about the electrical 'kindness' of our interrogators she spent the whole day sitting on the sidewalk outside the garrison, begging them to bring her in or bring me out, just for one second. Finally a sentinel with a heart went into my cell and brought me out. Today, having had children of my own, I feel ashamed of my attitude at seeing her sitting on the sidewalk like a beggar:

Stand up, mother, I shouted towering over her, I'm not a criminal, I'm here for my country.

Now that I've out-grown that age of political sincerity, the only memory that still stirs emotions from those days is neither the long hours of interrogation nor the stinking cells of our glorious prisons, not even lying down under a moving tank during demonstrations, but the sight of my mother on the sidewalk: a beautiful 37 year-old widow bearing a bundle of sandwiches and pleading for a glimpse of her rebel son; a rebel with a useless cause, for I didn't know much at the time, I didn't know that straightening the Lebanese cucumber, as our saying goes, needs a miracle from heaven or else a revolution from hell. All I heard was Bob Dylan's *The times are a changin'*, so why not us?

The family meeting that followed my release was less than warmly welcoming, and even less a happy goodbye. The second bureau was clement and clever. They did not want another Student Revolt in Lebanon. They had enough on their plate, and as I was a one man show with few followers, they decided to nip me in the bud. The wise men and women, headed by my grandfather, agreed: I'd better leave. But I was on my own. Changing the world was not on my family's agenda.

I reached Paris hitchhiking. Compared to the long futile hours waiting for a lift in the middle of nowhere, the stuffy prison cell back home became, at my lowest of times, a daydream. Fortunately I had managed to embezzle some money from my mother's savings. I also managed to run away from cheap pensions without paying, salving my conscience with songs of the revolution after reading *Steal This book*, by the great American Anarchist Abby Hoffman, who once ran for the presidency, wearing a Napoleon suit. Again English, not French, was my crutch during my three months on the road discovering the true meaning of freezing cold, hippy hangouts, and missing my mother's cooking. But being in Paris in May 68 was a treat and a reward. Let me read you a couple of paragraphs from TLM inspired by those explosive days.

**When we walked again, Claire's hand slipped into mine, softer than the fresh tulips glowing gently around us. I tightened my grip on her fingers, then I let go.**

We discovered that we had both been in Paris at the same time in sixty eight. I was stuck in a small hotel up rue Gay-Lussac while she was barricading down the road.

“We might have met!”

“I would have remembered.”

The thought of having once been in the same place had certain sweetness. Like missing the lottery by one, then winning it years later.

“How old were you then?” I asked.

“Seventeen.” She was smiling. “I hitchhiked to Paris with a trucker. He inspired my first short story – I’d written only poems till then. This guy drove a six-wheeler. He gave a continuous commentary on the movement of his engine.” She mimicked, “Down stroke! Piston! Power stroke! Fuel mix with air! Cylinder invasion! Intake valve! Rotate, rotate, rotate. Like he had a third eye roaming over the guts of his engine and he was singing their motions as he stormed along the highway. Later I wrote a satire about how out of touch De Gaulle was compared to a trucker’s rapport with his vehicle.” In Paris, Claire had been swept away by the general unrest. “Utopia within reach. But where did I fit in? No one in my family had been in politics. So there I was, after Rudi Dutschke was shot, and all the stuff I’d read in l’Humanité trying to find my place in the revolution.”

“A l’Élysée! A l’Élysée!”

“Yeah, and I went with the worst gang: les trublions. The ones who filled the police cars and ended up wet and battered at the end of the day.”

“Wet?”

“People threw water from balconies to protect us from the gas grenades.”

She thought the best thing about sixty eight was how all the doors were flung open and how thousands of young people flew into each other’s arms. “Maybe not utopia but euphoria, making me feel I could go on forever! And while we

were changing the world – facing death with a smile and a clenched fist – you were snug in a hotel room.”

“I was researching and writing my articles.”

“I see. You were making money out of us,” she said jokingly.

“I wish! I was still an apprentice, spending my mother’s savings. That Paris trip cost us the income from a whole tobacco season.”

“Not miraculous grapes?”

“Those too.”

The Paris adventure produced a few hasty articles and enough money to cross the channel. I was still in touch with one of the girls from next door. But by the time I reached London she was on her way to South Africa with her fiancé. She broke my heart and my bank balance. I’d been hoping to stay with her and watch every play and every concert and every film in town, not to mention all the books I was dying to read with her for she was a patient tutor. And sweet at it too. Nevertheless a month in foggy London at the zenith of the hippy hour was the experience of a lifetime. I lacked only money and sleep but the smell of public libraries nested in my sinuses for years to come. It was so powerful it brought me back to the city where I worked and learned and lived for most of my Diaspora years. The Last Migration is based in London. I’d lived in many places across the British Metropolis; but I chose my last spell in Shepherds Bush to house my first novel in English. Here is a glimpse from the Bush:

We wandered to the market and stopped at my favorite fruit and veg stall. It’s run by Mum and Dad (no relation of mine) and Charlie. Beyond the casual, ‘can I help you? How many? Thank you,’ and the occasional, ‘See you later,’ they don’t say much, even when they are overwhelmed with a flock of Indians, Arabs, Kurds, Jamaicans and other unidentifiable aliens like me who constantly jump the sacred queue, ignoring the Please Don’t Touch signs.

“But it’s compulsive for us to smell a lemon, feel a tomato or taste a grape,” I explained to Claire, “We can’t understand why we’re frowned at.”

“Perhaps fondling a fruit is a kind of alien adultery like ignoring signs and jumping queues,” Claire joked.

I told her how different this place was from the Nourieh souk in Beirut, where merchants sang the merits of their goods in comic, rhythmic melodies. It was a festival of the senses. Touching, smelling, tasting, ya hala, welcome. They would give away slices of watermelon and crisp lettuce hearts sprinkled with fresh water. There was plenty harvested locally, nothing was frozen or imported. It was a celebration to listen, to buy, to touch, to taste and taste again.

In front of us a restless African woman with large bosoms and tank-like buttocks pushed her way through. She was holding a long cucumber with her two hands, shaking it like a fireman’s hose towards Charlie.

“That’s how I like’m,” she laughed in a deep, croaky voice, her toothless mouth wide open. Everyone laughed except Mum and Dad. Charlie, too close to the action with that thing pointing at him, lost control and let out a chuckle before snatching the cucumber from the black Delilah. Thin and composed, Mum kept serving the laughing customers, her cheeks as ripe as the tomatoes on display.

“Forty five pence,” said Charlie, trying to look serious.

“Sure darling, it’s worth it.

A couple of critics noticed the atypical lack of culture shock in *The Last Migration*; the sharp feelings of estrangement usually endured by those fresh migrants parachuted into a totally new environment. But there are different levels of alienation. On the one hand, those felt by a complete stranger, like my mother as she landed in Melbourne and thought that they were driving worse than in war torn Beirut, because they drove on the left side of the road; and on the other, the incurable alienation of the heart. After living most of my life in the west I came to believe that some things never change, especially in the

emotional fabric of new migrants; second and third generations differ. Also the children, they adapt and change. But those with loaded memories suffer from nostalgia all their lives even if they never go back to their country of origin. During the worst of the war years, while living in London, and then Athens, I couldn't stay away from Lebanon for more than a few months at a time, going back for no urgent reason whatsoever, staying a week or ten days in the worst possible conditions just to ease that incurable nostalgia. In the first of the following excerpts, the protagonist, Ashraf Saad finds a message on his answering service. He thinks it might be from his daughter in Australia, but it's from his childhood friend, Marwan. The second excerpt describes Ashraf's visit to Cana, checking on his mother between two flights. Both passages deal with nostalgia from different angles:

**... I noticed the number flashing on my answer-phone. I pressed the button, absurdly thinking it might be Layla, but it was Marwan's voice, evidently just back from his job-hunting expedition in Qatar: "Hey ol' trooper, are you in town? You better be. Call me."**

**I reached for the receiver but it rang before I got to it.**

**"Ashraf!"**

**"Marwan!"**

**"I have something for you. Don't move."**

**Marwan says "Don't move" like someone holding a water pistol to your head – not lethal but still you don't want to get wet.**

**Some time later he was strutting up the four steps between Her Majesty's pavement and my Edwardian castle, two wrapped parcels under his arm. He didn't stoop or rush while the drizzle sprinkled his flock of red curls.**

**We hugged like two boats colliding at full speed. Marwan was looking good. He'd even put on some weight around the waist. His face glowed with satisfaction. He unwrapped the parcels with a flourish.**

**I stared first at them, then at him, amazed. He'd brought my Mustapha Farroukh watercolours from Cana. Two depictions of Lebanese village life: the first, a well in a front yard lined with pots of flowers and, in the background, a woman walking under a pergola vine. The second, a pine tree lofting on a hill overlooking a**



church tower in a misty valley. They were basking in a strong light as if melting away. As if Farroukh guessed, half a century ago, that he was painting what would become a lost paradise.

“Happy?”

“God, I’ve missed them as if they were flesh and blood. And you’ve actually seen our mothers. How are they?”

“Fine.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

In my migrations I’d found many new comrades but never a real male friend. Someone who’s an extension of me, whose loyalty is unquestioned like Marwan’s. I realised that the soulmate we take for granted when we’re young may never happen again in our later years.

We sat and talked about missing and yearning and healing and working and living and loving. We brought in the bottle of arak and sat down on the futon. Feyrouz was singing on in the background. A shepherd’s *keffia* flying in green prairies like a white sail. Red roses in morning dew. Calling the rain to fall in a *dabkeh* celebrating a plentiful harvest. We sang along, each verse bringing not a wave of happy memories but a surge of tearful longing. We reminisced about the Rahbany musicals and how Feyrouz had been wrapping her voice around the Arab world for more than half a century. “All hope was lost,” sighed Marwan, “when Assi Rahbany burnt out. He was a living cedar tree.”

The music evoked Beirut’s Golden Age. Marwan enthused about the Charlie Chaplin of downtown Beirut, Shoushou. “He stole the game from the intellectuals and gave it to the public on a platter of roaring laughter. He deserves a statue in Centre-Ville Beirut to show that our fatso entrepreneurs have some sense of history. Some values, damn it, besides money money money.” Marwan’s voice burned with anger. “I hate the way they are demolishing the old centre and plonking down a new rootless, soulless ghost town with only a handful of old buildings preserved. Ignorant arrogant assholes! What do they think they’re doing? We need to continue the country, not reinvent it. Every single fallen stone should come back to its place.

We should rebuild the souks, restore the crumbling buildings – preserve the essence of a city that’s been there at least five thousand years.”

\* \* \*

Suddenly we were in Cana’s market.

Lifeless. Except for a few people rushing furtively towards the only operating shop, I was faced with closed shutters, barricaded doors, piles of garbage.

“Stop here, please. And wait for me.”

Like a deep-sea diver in his bell, I remained insulated from the extent of the damage. One thought kept repeating from the depths of my disillusion. Thank God I didn’t bring Claire to this. Gone were the happy settings of my childhood, buried in the broken frontyards and the infected alleys full of sickly cats scavenging among the leftovers of rushed departures. Nor could the barren fields landscape the changing colour of tobacco leaves I so wanted Claire to see for herself. For someone who hasn’t tasted the honey, empty beehives don’t breed sweet memories.

A poignant melancholy urged my steps towards our house. The smell of roasting coffee beans fell over me like a warm blanket over a shipwreck. I’m back. My senses started to bleep. My mother had timed a welcome tailor-made for me. Others would have fidgeted all day, going from door to window to rooftop, fighting tears of anticipation, forgetting to breathe. Not her. She’d prepared the copper grinder over the makeshift open fire under the walnut tree. Like another day from a distant past, I’d squat by her side and turn the handle of the grinder. Grsh, grsh. She’d start the next batch in the roasting tin, shaking it over the fire until the sun behind us sank in the famished jaws of rocks like a slice of beetroot.

Another set of eyebrows were raised during my tours promoting TLM: Why after more than thirty years writing and publishing fiction and poetry in Arabic, had I switched to English? Good question, to which I sometimes said simply, why not? And left it at that.

But *why not* leaves the door open to all kinds of winds. At best it tells you one is free to do whatever one feels like. When launching the book in the Shepherds Bush library, I related to the audience a parabolic but true story explaining an important reason behind my belated cultural emigration. As you may know, moonlighting is common practice with journalists. Especially when living abroad, with a raging war behind us every penny counts. Ethically if one is working for the printed press you don't two-time your mother rag. But you can do radio, television, or translations. I did the lot. Not everything was enjoyable of course, but I liked children's programs the most. Their freshness helped offset the dreary routine of a desk job more often than not crowded with wires of gruesome news. So one day a distributor of children's TV programs called me to translate thirteen episodes of a cartoon commissioned by a Gulf channel. It was fun. It told the story of a daring butterfly who did all kinds of dangerous stunts, not only in self defense, but to break the traditional rules unfairly imposed on butterflies. The pretty flutterer had no inkling that somewhere in the Arabian desert of today there was a drought of imagination and lack of humor to the point of considering a naughty butterfly an instigator of immorality. Not even I knew that much.

One day, I received a mind boggling phone call. After a succession of 'guess whats' interrupted by shredded, hysterical chuckles, the above mentioned distributor said that the butterfly series was not allowed an airing in Saudi Arabia. Why? You won't believe it, the man said: because the butterfly wears a bikini to the beach.

Yes my friends, a cartoon butterfly was considered a bad influence on good muslim girls. Along with nudity, carnal love, alcohol, homosexuality, drugs, religion and discussing freely the Almighty Himself. Taboos. You are cast out if not castrated. Hoping for a free literary scene with such censorship is simply lunacy. The Saudi criteria of censorship are currently implemented all over the Gulf states. Libya has a mind of its own; you never know why or when the Libyan brothers will see evil in a book. On the other hand they are famous for considering eternity a 9 to 5 job; paying their dues in a virtual tomorrow that never comes. You don't get your money from Libya, ask any Arab publisher. The print houses of Saddam's Iraq were spewing out hundreds of books every day; all state controlled, all dirt cheap. No incoming Arabic or other printed material could match in price that state subsidized bulk of books. The same, with some differences, applies to

Syria, whereas Egypt is renowned for consuming its own national products. On the other hand, Egypt has been fiercely hit by fundamentalist watchdogs in the last decade. A group of them asked the ministry of culture a couple of years ago to confiscate Khalil Gibran's *Prophet*. Almost a century after its publication and the only book, other than the Koran, written by an Arab translated into every living language.

Unfortunately the general state of communication through the written word remains a source of crushing frustration. The books do not live out their normal life span. They appear and disappear without logic, plan or any stable framework. Writers have no idea of the whereabouts of their books. Publishers, distributors and book shops can do whatever they see fit with your book, there's nothing you can do about it. Listen to this character from TLM describing the state of Arab writers today:

**The Moroccan novelist Nassri Mahmoud was reading a twelve-page paper entitled *Houmoum Al Kateb Al Arabi*, The problems of Arab writers. *Houmoum* is a particular word in Arabic, it encompasses everything from slight anxieties to spiritual dilemmas. (...) But Nasri was inspired (...) his back to the sun, his red curls about to burn, unwavering he lamented. "The Arab writer is surrounded by *houmoum*. Physically his travel is restricted. Mentally, spiritually and politically he's in chains. He can't piss in peace.(...) "Publishing," He went on "is medieval in our countries. Arab writers rarely make money from their work. There are no royalties, no grants, no dole, nothing, yet writers are expected to be social champions, the voice of the people, carriers of high morality, even prophets. And if you decline to be what is expected of you, then you are a *Sou'louk*, an outcast to be watched closely. Censors are everywhere. They have their office in my guts!" yelled Nasri, thrusting his hands between his legs. "In my prostate!"**

Besides the obstacles of censorship, personal reasons played a major role in what I fancy calling 'my English expedition'. After living more than two decades in English-speaking countries; reading, translating, making friends, and fathering two daughters whose education and culture are English, it was natural to try my hand with some writing in that language. Nothing serious. One very short story, casually commissioned by my daughters

as we were waiting for the train in NSW, Australia, on a sunny day. The girls had read a few poems of mine translated into English, but they asked for a story to kill the time. That story entitled 'Crossed Rails', found its way by mere chance into an Australian anthology of short stories. From then on I received encouragement from complete strangers. People wrote to me enquiring about more of the same atmospheric, poetic, impressionist material as in Crossed Rails. So I began scribbling. I had little if any idea where I was going with what I churned out. Then one day a colleague of mine showed me an ad in the Guardian: a Literary Consultant willing to help potential fiction writers. Perfect. Oops! She was in Lancaster. Three hours by train from London. Still, I made the phone call. Six years later TLM was born. God only knows how many trips it took me to the freezing north of England, but no matter how down and out I'd been at times I could never give up. So powerful was the desire for achieving communication; it kept me going all the way to 'Panache Publications' in Australia.

Why Australia? First because I became Australian like the rest of my family and had a cultural arena there among the Lebanese community and the literati in Sydney and Melbourne. Second because it was easier for me, as a New Australian, to approach publishers, given their interest in multiculturalism. Third because Panache gave me the freedom to choose my own cover designer. My Lancaster mentor disliked the outcome, deeming it dated. Personally I thought it was a mind stirrer; different from anything on the stalls and bookshelves and revealing the spirit of the book. Later I was satisfied when we won the presentation prize at the writers' festival in Sydney two years ago. After its launch in Beirut TLM remained number one on the best seller shelf at Virgin megastores for three months and was sold out in Australia. In London, the borough of Harrow had already organized six different venues to launch and discuss TLM.

The few copies we have here tonight are the last of TLM. Up for grabs at your leisure.

Thank you.

Jad El Hage

(Read at NDU with Valerie Aoun)

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