

# Poetry Flash

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The Non-Wordly World: A Conversation with Etel Adnan

By Kathleen Weaver

Etel Adnan is the author of *The Indian Never Had a Horse*, poems in a handsome paper edition with etchings by artist Russell Chatham (1985), and *Sitt Marie Rose*, a novel which was translated from the French by Georgina Dleege (1982). Both are available from Post-Apollo Press in Sausalito, where Etel Adnan makes her home.

“Love is a supreme violence...” —Sitt Marie Rose

Kathleen Weaver: Etel Adnan is the name of Arabic origin?

Etel Adnan: Yes, a very old name.

KW: You say your grandparents were from Damascus.

EA: Yes, on my father's side. My mother was a Greek from Smyrna, before WWI when Smyrna was a predominantly Greek city, what used to be called cities of Asia Minor. So there was a contradiction.

KW: How do you see it?

EA: My parents belonged to two different worlds. My mother was a Greek; for her my father was an Ottoman officer, a Turk, and the Turks were the enemy. There were no unpleasant discussions at home but there was a clear-cut sense of two different worlds. I grew up with two people who both looked to the past. My mother because Smyrna was burned in 1922. So that was gone, and she was in exile in Lebanon. My father was a top Ottoman officer. But he also considered himself a man of a lost empire, of an empire that lost the war. And he was much older than my mother. He could have been my grandfather. So I grew up in Beirut both as an insider and a bit of an outsider. My mother was homesick for Smyrna. For my father it was for his roots in a broad sense. His world was the Ottoman world. He was like an officer after a defeat. There was an underlying sense of something lost. And I grew up very aware of that. I think I absorbed it from my parents. So that I became, right there in the beginning, unconsciously and then more consciously, very sensitive to this basic 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon which is the

displacement of people, forced or unforced migrations of people. Every other person is somehow in exile. Either a refugee from a country or a refugee from an event.

KW: Your father was an officer, you say. Was that his only life?

EA: You see he went to military academy at age 12, as a cadet. His father was an officer, and his uncles. It was a whole military caste. In WWI he was one of the officers of the battle of the Dardenelles. When the war ended he must have been 50. He was a military man, but not an aggressive man. He was not militaristic. I never heard him praise war. He was a traditional officer of that era. They have their own code of behavior, a sense of morality, that you respect a prisoner, for example. In a way it was an aristocratic code. You don't kill unnecessarily. You don't humiliate a prisoner because he is in your hands. He told me stories of chivalry, how you don't care for money, how he made tea by burning English paper money that his soldiers took out of the pockets of English soldiers. There were things that he considered were not done, even during war. I would say he was critical of the massacre of the Armenians by the Turks. He never justified it. Although he was not part of the officers who took that decision; he was on another front. But privately all his life in conversations he always said that was unnecessary. He had his own views. He thought it was unfair to massacre civilians.

My mother came from a working-class family. Her own father was a wood carver. He used to make beautiful carvings on top of furniture and closets. She was very proud. He didn't use the word artist, not even the word craftsman. He was a mad doing beautiful things. She used to tell me how he carved roses on top of the bed (posts). I think she got from that a sense of beauty. If she washed pans in the kitchen she said, "Look, how beautiful, it shines like the moon." She was not naïve but very close to everyday reality. She enjoyed things. She had a variety of feelings. Sometimes she'd get homesick and cry for Smyrna. Later she'd put on a record of Greek music and start dancing. She thought she cooked fish better than anyone because Greeks cook fish better than anyone. It was a complete little universe, and everything in that universe was right. My mother's name was Rose Lily Lacorte, but they called her Lily. My father was Assaf Kadri. Kadri comes from a chapter in the Koran, which is a chapter in the revelation of the Koran, the night the Koran descended, Kadri means, "the night of destiny," the one chosen by destiny. It is a common first name.

KW: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

EA: Not from my mother. My father had one son and two daughters, and my half-sisters were about 20 years older. So that they were the generation of women who were veiled, and my brother used to come sometimes and take me out dancing or to night clubs...

KW: How did you come here? What was your first move from Beirut?

EA: I went to French schools. So I grew up speaking French. French was my mother tongue, the language I was educated in, although I do speak Arabic.

KW: What language did your parents speak?

EA: Turkish and Greek and I know those two languages. But I do not write in them. I picked them up at home.

KW: Is Arabic the main language in Beirut?

EA: It is the national language. The government functions in Arabic. When the French came they openly subsidized the French schools and strengthened the French system of education so that it was a very strange education. We were children sitting in Beirut and knowing everything about French mountains and rivers, but we didn't know the name of the villages next door. Children take things at face value. I can't say I suffered. It's much later that I realized alienation. And when I read Franz Fanon I said, "Yes, how right he is." As children, we were not unhappy. But we were geared to go to Paris. Paris was the place to be if you wanted to be civilized. We absorbed that. We were all impatient to go to Paris. I finished high school and started college. I prepared the French BA in French literature and came to Paris with a French government scholarship to prepare a PhD. When I arrived I found a room in the American House at Cité Universitaire outside Paris. Finding a room was like the lottery. It happened that a student had left and I got her room. There I met the first Americans in my life, in 1949. They were nostalgic for New York. I had a friend who took me to the movies not to see the movie but to show me the furniture and the scenery behind the movie, to see how America was. You see, I got involved in this American thing. I said, "How can I go to America?" The easiest was to be a student there. So I applied to Berkeley...

KW: You studied for some time in Paris?

EA: I stayed in Paris about three years, but I never did serious studies because living in Paris absorbed me totally. I used to go and see friends and purposely miss the last metro, so I was crossing the whole city on foot at night arriving at 4 in the morning, so happy to walk. Paris was just coming out of the war, you know '49 - '50. It was very exhilarating. Because you still had the darkness of the war, as if the war had left a color on the city. I remember Paris dark and people blaming everything on the war. The war was still very vivid. I left the Cité after two years and took a room with a French woman who said she couldn't bear singing because she remembered the German soldiers singing. She would close her windows so she wouldn't hear those people occupying her country. There was a gloom, a very tragic mood in Paris, which was full of people from everywhere, full of refugees. In the American Pavillion there were all those students, people who fought the war; for example there were Yugoslavs who hid under trains to smuggle themselves out and come to Paris. There were people from Czechoslovakia, from Nazi camps, so you see it was international. There was both sadness and joy that the war was won and over. There was a sense of the future. You could read it on people's faces. It was a very extraordinary time in Paris, and it coincided with Sartre's existentialism, and I would say I do owe something to him. I had gone to a Catholic school, and in fact I really didn't like them. There was something about them since childhood that never convinced me. We were always sinful whatever we did. So for the first time I heard someone speaking of morality without religion. Because they told us if you are not religious you are not moral,

you are evil, and here was a man like Sartre saying you are responsible for yourself and others, and you don't need a church for that. It's just you and you.

KW: Did you absorb French literature?

EA: I had already in Beirut. My real literary years were before I came to Paris. I used to read poetry, French poetry. I think I lived through movies and poems. American movies and French movies. I remember movies like *Blood and Sand* for example, or *The Scarlet Empress*, which Marlene Dietrich. From the time I was eleven years old I remember movies. I remember, I don't know why, Edward G. Robinson, the harpoon. I remember *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *Zorro*...

KW: That was a happy time for you in Paris?

EA: Yes, extremely. Moving around was the most important thing, looking around in the streets. The sunsets in Paris are extraordinary because they are in the Seine, and I remember the Place de la Concorde at night, its lights as if the sky came down to earth. It was overwhelming not for one day but for years.

KW: Did you write then?

EA: I wrote my first poem in Beirut when I was about 19 and I called it "The Book of the Sea." I loved the sea in Beirut. I liked it abnormally, as people like a person. I liked it more than the man I was going out with.

KW: Did you know you would take writing seriously?

EA: I think I thought I was born to be a poet. I used to read, read, read, and hypnotize myself with poetry. You see it was an addiction. And I thought, poor things, people who are not addicted to poetry. They don't have a life. You know when I was in Beirut, as I said, I went to college and had a French professor who was one of the top French critics. He gave us classes on Baudelaire and Gerard de Nerval. His name is Gabriel Bounoure. He was a friend of Andre Gide and one of the best critics of Daudet. He was himself an adventurer of the mind. I want to tell you about an event, when this professor invited Andre Gide to judge a debate on inspiration in poetry. At that time we meant Bergson against Valery: "is poetry inspired, something particularly divine, or out of craft?"

KW: What do you think about it?

EA: I think the opposite of what I said then. I think it's something you wait for until it comes. What comes is the tone, the form it takes. That you wait for. Like a plant that grows underneath then suddenly you see something coming out in the garden that you didn't know was planted there, like a spring emerging on a very dry landscape. If there is work the work is done without you knowing it. I studied Paul Valery to defend my view. Gide said I won the debate. I said something, I don't remember what, but something debunking an aspect of poetry in Paul Eluard who is a great poet. Gide had a very peevish side; he loved to be iconoclastic. He was for the destruction of ready-made values. So he said, when you come to Paris, come and see me. So I did. I had gone to a student

reunion where there was an American girl who said that France had lost the war because of Gide. So I was upset. I said, "I'm going to go and ask him right now." You see Gide wrote in praise of sensuality, and a combination of right-wing politics and Catholic-thinking said he was responsible for preaching homosexuality and sensuality in general. Some people made that link that France lost the war, was totally decadent, because of Gide.

So I went to see him. He had just translated Hamlet in to French, and they were playing his version with Jean-Louis Barrault. He had just come from the rehearsal. The debate had happened two years before. He asked me how I was. I said, "Paris is beautiful." He said, "You know, beauty is a *décor*, are you warm, are you hungry?" I was so impressed that this famous person was so sensitive to basic needs, and that endeared him to me even more. He asked me as a favor to contact a student who had written to him. I answered him after I had seen the student, but by this time he was in Southern France. He answered that he was ill and had lost his appetite. Two months later he died. That was '49, '50. That came as a confirmation of some inner destination, the fact that poetry was important, the atmosphere of poetry being the thing that mattered most in the world.

KW: So then Berkeley?

EA: I came to Berkeley in 1955. I arrived and discovered I didn't know English at all, beyond a few words. It was terrible. I couldn't write my papers. I didn't understand what was going on in the Department of Philosophy. There was a great man in the Department, Dr. Stephen Pepper. The rest of the department was geared to Symbolic Logic and History of Science, and I didn't even know what they were saying. I was in a state of shock. After a year I was very unhappy. I felt sick. I had back trouble, a back operation. I really was a bit shattered. So I took a leave of absence and went to Mexico for seven months, to think; from town to town and bus to bus I saw Mexico. When I came back I thought if I went to Harvard I would like philosophy. They accepted me... But after a year I couldn't afford anymore to go to school, either financially or psychologically. So I came back to California and found a job teaching philosophy at Dominican College of San Rafael.

KW: This returned you to your Catholic background?

EA: As Catholic colleges go, it was very liberal. And there was a difference; it was not a colonial situation with French nuns treating Lebanese as little natives to civilize. That was from '58 to '72. I taught Philosophy of Literature and Humanities. I was interested in American thinking, people like William James. What really interested me was Anglo-Saxon philosophy, which is really not taught in Sorbonne. French philosophy is geared more to the German and French, Hegel or Heidegger, besides Descartes. I like David Hume. The English philosophers are like English weather to me. There is a poetic sense. You feel the senses are open. They are very sensitive to the way the body thinks. When you read David Hume, for me it opened my sense of perception. Study of perception was very prevalent at Harvard in those years. Philosophy of perception, epistemology. Of course, I'm afraid academia exposes you to it and kills it at the same time. But if you read

it and when they don't rehash it to you, when you just read it like you read a novel, then Hume is a very great philosopher. I remember I fell in love with Darwin. For me Darwin is like John Muir. He is constantly beautiful and wonderful. John Muir discovers a valley every day. Darwin discovers something every day. That I love in Anglo-Saxon thinking, and that is certainly why I am in American...

KW: When did you get going in writing and painting? Was it a struggle for you to express yourself?

EA: Yes, I attended universities, but I attended like writers would. Instead of looking for degrees and methods of thinking, I rather looked for revelations, and you might tell me, what a strange place to look for revelations. But that's why I didn't get a PhD. I started writing in the sixties because of the anti-war movement. In 1960, I also started painting.

KW: Did you feel you were inhibited about poetry the way you said you were initially about painting?

EA: No, I never was. You see I was educated with words. What I discovered about painting through painting is that it is a language that can go as far as any other language. It is not a surface thing. We are used to communicating with words. Painting always seemed like something exotic. So I discovered that it's a language that's not meant to be translated into words. Painting, I suppose, later influenced my poetry in the sense that I started as an abstract artist, very close to Nicolas De Stael's approach, painting with a palette knife, which dictates flat broad surfaces of color. I started with abstractions, in '59. My first show was in 1960. It was a great era of abstract art. A certain method of painting led me to write the same way.

KW: What do you mean?

EA: I didn't paint as a person who comes from literature. If I did I would have been more realistic. I was not. But I'm writing as a person who comes from painting. By that I mean what you do is make your composition. You trust your colors and your shapes, your gestures. You trust that something beyond that will come through even if you don't know exactly what. You know that you are not just decorating a surface. You know that you are saying more than what meets the eye. In a way this is what we call a collage, but instead of using bits of paper you abstract shapes or planes of color. This is the way I proceed in poetry. I have the need to say something very precise, but I don't need to say it in a precise way. And I trust that whatever I want to say will come through. That I don't need to be sequential. I don't even need to be clear. I have to be clear in my intentions, not in my words.

KW: This is evident in your book, *The Indian Never Had a Horse*. There is an accrual of meaning as the book progresses, rather than each poem being a discrete resolution or finality.

EA: This comes from how I proceed as a painter. I would insist on the word abstract, or what people call non-figurative painting, which is like music. I like to reach a depth of

meaning that has nothing to do with words even if I use words. We want to tap a source from where the words come. There is a non-figurative or non-wordly world that is ours. But you have to express it through objective things which are the colors or words...

KW: Your poetry came out of the Vietnam War?

EA: This is how it started, to say something; then I wrote about the Palestinian situation. I am bilingual in French and English, but my poetry is really in English.

KW: I think of your novel *Sitt Marie Rose* as an essay-novel. It is also a prose poem. You wrote this in French, and I wanted to mention that I think the English version by Georgina Kleege reads very well. I think it conveys a great deal of feeling and poetry. Editions des femmes originally published this book in 1978.

EA: Yes, I was in Paris; I left Dominican and went to Beirut for 3 years. The war started in Lebanon. Then, when I was in Paris an actual event happened which was the basis for *Sitt Marie Rose*. The Phalangists did kidnap a woman and tortured and kill her for the simple reason that she was pro-Palestinian. She was a woman in love with a man, a feminist. She never carried a gun. She was not a soldier. She was not against them in a hateful way. She was passionately against war. For me she was the symbol of injustice, of the cruelty of war. I wrote it end to end in a month's sitting.

KW: One of the things I felt reading it was that you had personally experienced the horrors that you write about, the experience of that it's like to be in a city under siege.

EA: Yes, I was there in '75, '78, parts of '77. War is an abstract in the newspapers. But when you are in it you realize the individual tragedies, the humiliation. I think it's the most humiliating situation for human beings because they feel totally powerless. It ends up as a very degrading experience.

KW: You write about the sexual element in war. You feel a perverted sexuality is exploding in the violence of modern war, in its particular form in which nothing is sacred and there is no chivalry.

EA: That's right. There is not chivalry. And I think sexuality is the strongest expression the average person can experience, the most available to most people. Practically every human being has the power of sexual expression. When it is not civilized, when it is not an expression of love, of communication, then it becomes the most powerful expression of the worst in human beings.

KW: In *Sitt Marie Rose*, one of the themes, the suggestion is that this tremendous carnal brutality, torture, mutilation and extreme forms of violence taking place in Beirut was a perversion of sexuality, meaning male sexuality, that this was and is a male problem.

EA: Yes, women in Lebanon did not have their voices in the war. They were very free within certain domains, but when it came to matters of politics and war, they didn't exist. That's why the woman was killed. Besides being against the politics decided by her own group, she also was a woman meddling in the privilege of the man. You see, when you read the papers there is always rape involved in the behavior of soldiers unleashed in a village or against their enemies. Because it's the most powerful experience the average man is used to having. They do not all get powerful emotions out of music or painting or even sports. The common denominator is really sexual experience. With love it is a good thing, but once it is impersonalized, once they want to express power—that is what comes to their minds. There is always that in the vocabulary and in the form of tortures they use. Men identify themselves through their sexuality. They identify someone else through their sexuality. So, when they want to hurt someone, it is usually through sexuality. That is why they have sexual mutilations even after the death of a person.

KW: In *Sitt Marie Rose* you say, "power is always obscene." That shocked me.

EA: Yes, it is. Of course powerlessness is not a good thing. But power that is sure to be unchecked will be obscene. I have seen very few examples of a people who had absolute power and managed to remain normal. Once they have a power that they know has no boundary, they will exaggerate, and the very nature of that exaggeration is beastly. It is always power over someone else and cannot be good by the very fact that this is an imposition. So it is obscene, and it will lead to sadism. It is a rape of the other, a humiliation. Because this exaggerated power means the powerlessness of the others. Power, it's a balance we need, but once it gets imbalanced it can but hurt.

KW: I was wondering if in your experience of growing up in Beirut and later returning there, if you experience a sense of sexual repression in the country. You imply this in *Sitt Marie Rose*, as, for example, when you write that physical torture is a disgust for the body and a desire to murder and destroy the body.

EA: By sexual repression I do not mean lack of sexual activity... Sexual repression is really judgment passed on how you see your sexual life. Most of the people I knew, all those Phalangists, for example, are the result of Catholic schools. They always equated sexuality with sin, so it's not a matter of having a mistress or a woman every day. Repression is not a question of quantity. You may decide you do not have a sexual life, but maybe don't feel repressed. What I meant by repression in relation to your sexual life. What they really repress is their normal joy, not their sexual activity... I'm not saying that the opposite of sexual repression is license. The opposite of repression would be the acceptance of sexuality as one aspect of human expression.

KW: It seems to me the feeling that emerges from this book, which has a strong erotic thread running through it, is that sex is both good and evil.

EA: There is an aesthetic of war. War is erotic. If war were not appealing, humanity wouldn't have wars. You see war gets bad for man once they get hurt. It's either a game or it's a sport. Maybe it is a very exhilarating thing. And, because women don't participate in

fighting, they see the worst part of wars. They see the destruction as in Greek tragedy. A man is so involved in war, that, in a way, there are happy moments. It is constant adventure, and it's erotic.

KW: At one point in the novel, you write that morality is violence.

EA: Violence is energy. We cannot say violence is bad. Morality is passion. In that sense it is positive violence.

KW: You also write that the truest love is to love the Stranger in opposition to your own brother.

EA: That's it. There is a big misunderstanding in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. You have so many liberation movements that don't understand each other. Each one loves his own kind, and they don't work together. Because the whole of politics is really a dialectical relation between what you call you and the other. You see, to love your own kind is a very natural thing. It's even dangerous because it can get tribal. Because liking your own kind can give your real strength, and that makes you even more capable of aggressivity against whomever you consider the other. In this case, Lebanese Christians against the Palestinians. It could be the Americans against the Russians. The greatest danger is not the lack of love. Sometimes there is too much love. Americans loving themselves or the Jews or the Arabs. But it is when the one loves the other which is the difficult thing. This is the marriage. It is to get out of your boundaries. The tension is a good thing because it makes for the possibility of what I call marriage, like the coming to terms with the impossible...

Kathleen Weaver is a Berkeley writer and translator. Recent translations from Spanish are *Where the Island Sleeps Like a Wing*, Selected Poetry of Nancy Morejon (Cuba), Black Scholar Press, 1985, and *Fire From the Mountain*, by Omar Cabezas (Nicaragua), Crown, 1985.