Etel Adnan arrived in Paris to start a new life a few years before Albert Camus was to die. What links them is more than the fact that she now lives in his former apartment building. It has rather to do with their origins in the Arab world and status as outsiders to French culture, which imparted to each one an acute understanding of what it means to be fully human. Under such conditions individual consciousness unfolds in a high state of attentiveness, and one can only create dangerously.

In her “Short Letter to a Young Poet” that opens this volume, Adnan affirms it is a matter of life and death to write poetry, and, at its end, in the excerpt from There, one of my favorites among her writings, one has only to follow the centrifugal force of her thoughts as they turn from self to other. Who is she? Where is she? Here? Over there? I am reminded of Merce Cunningham’s description of his dance as having no fixed points in space. Wherever you are is a center. That’s how I perceive Etel Adnan’s prolific art-making through the changing climates in which she is now poet, painter, essayist, philosopher, and now journalist, novelist, memoirist. When I first became acquainted with her writing I wondered if I might be lost in its immensity of mind, something I had considered previously with Gertrude Stein, another writer whose spirit is housed in the same Saint-Sulpice neighborhood. But Adnan
knows how to temper the weight of the world with a lightness and freedom that humble artists possess. Perhaps that is because, as she herself reveals, she has spent a lifetime in the company of angels, Paul Klee having been one of them.

Profoundly humanist, you can tell she loves being in the world, the soulfulness of her phrasing illuminated in the lyrical reflections of a painter’s palette. She notices everything, her observations defined not merely by looking but a looking into, the manner of an artist possessed of a sense of wonder that has never left her. Ordinary life is given the value of myth and cosmic event or sometimes it is just ordinary life in all its fundamental lessons. There is a true goodness in her spirit that comes forth in a deeply compassionate feeling for people and suffering that is not always evident in exceptional thinkers. She has a philosophic mind that avoids detachment through analytical prowess, unflinching in its recognition of evil, shame, horror, and violence in all their manifestations. This comprehension of life extends from the ancient world to the contemporary world, to all species and to outer space.

And still, the cosmopolitan in Adnan celebrates her great pleasures in life: love, art, travel, food, conversation, weather. She evinces a mystical attachment to nature, reveling in her beloved Mt. Tamalpais of the California years, or recalling the experience of swimming in the sea in Beirut. Showing her humorous side, she compares her method for starting each new book with the image of a bird waiting for an airstream and then just going with the flow. In Adnan’s great body of work is the portrait of a person who has experienced true happiness. A woman who loves music. She imagines life as a rose and
thinking as a form of poetry, an inkwell as a *commedia* figure. What is her intriguing title “the sun on the tongue” but an image of light warming the intimate floor on which one stages speaking, tasting, caressing? Perhaps this is the true meaning of luminosity.

Born in Lebanon, in 1925, to a Greek mother and a Syrian father, Adnan has lived the idea of worldliness in the long decades between leaving Beirut in the late nineteen-forties, settling many years in California, and moving permanently to Paris in the twenty-first century, crisscrossing multiple cultures and continents that experienced fierce conflicts over myth and history through war, exile, diaspora, colonization, and that yet have produced everywhere glorious poetry and heartbreakingly beautiful images and friendships. Her feeling for geography is spiritual. There is World War II and then there is the revolution of Pina Bausch; there is the Lebanese Civil War and then there is her remarkable heroine Marie-Rose; there is the Iraq War and then there is the legacy of al-Hallaj. The freedom of women exists alongside terrible crimes of honor.

Her dreams of Mayakovsky float between Moscow and North Beach. An abstract landscape is the color of memory. Her love poems make a songbook. Love and its passions is a constant theme. What she writes about Nietzsche in *The Cost for Love* might just as well be attributed to her: that he had no system but a series of intuitions borne out of the generosity of his mind, this generosity being a form of love. Risk everything.

In the world of Adnan wisdom is the better part of virtuosity, whatever shape it takes: writings, paintings, plays, drawings, tapestries, films, artist’s books, essays on art, literature,
dance, and theatre. The memoir is her natural home because it is a form of journey that tells stories about the lives of real people and places, weaving in and out of memory through aphoristic fragments and circuitous pathways. Just as comfortable a setting is the unfolding of her beloved accordion-like *leporello* that is essentially a form of narrative in motion. Here the lines of writing and drawing and poetry fill the bellowing pages of a book that opens wider and wider into time and space.

In a moment of serious whimsy, some years ago Etel Adnan confided in one of the jewel-like paragraphs that distinguish her writings, “I have to tell you: I am, each year, a year older. But there is a place in an anti-universe where I am, each year, a year younger.”

O, lady of Rue Madame, what new knowledge can you reveal to Earth’s anxious souls between here and eternity?