From the outside in, and from the inside-in.
“Exploring convivencia”
INTERVIEW WITH NATHALIE HANDEL

BY REWA ZEINATI

“Although, we did not have solutions for what was going on nor could we explain or define the East so rigidly, we felt a deep need to respond in any way we could. So we went to our natural prayer, poetry. We went to the human voices that have enchanted us and that have changed our lives and spirits,” says Nathalie Handal, award-winning poet, playwright, and editor. In this interview, Handal talks honestly about her craft, her role as a woman writer, and what she discovers to be “home.”

RZ: In your new collection, Poet in Andalucía, you re-create Federico García Lorca’s journey, Poet in New York, but in reverse. What inspired this collection?

NH: Poet in New York is one of the most important books written about the city. Lorca is a poet who continues to call us to question what makes us human. 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. Eighty years after Lorca’s sojourn in America, and myself a poet in New York of Middle Eastern roots—and this being a crucial moment in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict—I wanted to explore convivencia which in Spanish means “coexistence.” The Spanish convivencia describes the time when Christians, Jews, and Muslims lived in relative harmony in Islamic Spain. There are numerous debates surrounding notions of tolerance in al-Andalus during the Middle Ages. However, one cannot deny the rich and prosperous cultural and artistic life that existed during that period—a life that these communities created together. Mahmoud Darwish’s words kept echoing: “Andalus… might be here or there, or anywhere… a meeting place of strangers in the project of building human culture…. It is not only that there was a Jewish-Muslim coexistence, but that the fates of the two people were similar…. Al-Andalus for me is the realization of the dream of the poem.” So recreating Lorca’s journey in reverse became increasingly important to me.

RZ: What was the most challenging part of writing this collection?

NH: Coming to the understanding that although peace is possible if we desire—because what people want most is to live—we stand far away from that reality. It was challenging to weave hope into the poems, staying true to my vision while also understanding the fundamental forces that continue to lead us into conflict states instead of conciliatory ones.

RZ: How is this new collection, Poet in Andalucía, different than anything you’ve written before?

NH: I had a blueprint, a map of the book before I started it.

RZ: You were listed as one of the “100 Most Powerful Arab Women in 2011” and one of the “Power 500/The World’s Most Influential Arabs” in 2012 and 2013. Where has your inner strength and powerful voice sprung from? And how do you cultivate it?

NH: Staying faithful to my vision and understanding that every challenge is an opportunity for transformation, and a deeper more fundamental power.
RZ: How are women, writers or not, in your opinion, empowered? How do they get that fierce fearlessness, do you think?

NH: From what they have endured, from those who inspire them, from other women, from love, from that luminous-kickass-energy-force-inside.

RZ: Where is ‘home’ for you?

I suppose I’ve given versions of the same response over the years. Today, I will simply say that home is where you can see the most profound side of yourself.

RZ: You have promoted international literature through translation, research, and the editing of the groundbreaking *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology*, an Academy of American Poets bestseller and winner of the Pen Oakland Josephine Miles Book Award and the W.W. Norton landmark anthology, *Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from the Middle East, Asia & Beyond*. How important is it to promote international literature, and why did you feel these anthologies were necessary?

It’s vital—one of the most fundamental ways to understand other worlds; their history, culture, traditions. Coming for the Middle East but also having a global identity, I almost didn’t have an option. Thank goodness I enjoy editing and translating. It’s a tough job.

*The Poetry of Arab Women* was prepared to eradicate invisibility: to provide an introduction to Arab women poets, to make visible the works of a great number of Arab women poets who are virtually unknown to the West, to make visible many Arab-American women poets who are marginalized within the American literary and ethnic scenes, and to demonstrate the wide diversity of Arab women’s poetry, which extends to other languages besides Arabic and English.

*Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from the Middle East, Asia & Beyond* was conceived following the events of September 11th, 2001. Tina Chang, Ravi Shankar and I started this journey together because we felt troubled by the negative views showcased in the media about the East. Although, we did not have solutions for what was going on nor could we explain or define the East so rigidly, we felt a deep need to respond in any way we could. So we went to our natural prayer, poetry. We went to the human voices that have enchanted us and that have changed our lives and spirits. We hope this adds to the ongoing dialogue between East and West. This anthology celebrates the artistic and cultural forces flourishing today from the East, bringing together the works of South Asian, East Asian, Middle Eastern, and Central Asian poets as well as poets living in the Diaspora. The collection includes 400 voices from 55 different countries writing in 40 different languages. The work included is diverse in style and aesthetic from political, to apolitical, erotic to experimental.

We are currently planning the 5th year anniversary celebration of the publication of our anthology in Hong Kong this summer. Simultaneously, we are launching the Language for a New Century website intended to reach educators and to assist them in adopting and teaching the contents of the book. Beyond this, the LNC site will be an energetic space where teachers, professors, students, readers, poets, and anyone interested in this anthology and the amazing voices from the East can go to for more information.

RZ: What do you think of Arab writers who can only write in English? Do you think they owe their heritage the ability to express, and the insistence upon expressing themselves in Arabic as well?

We don’t owe our heritage as much as we owe ourselves—whatever it is we feel or need. We can’t force connections and alliances. We have our personal circumstances and histories, and shouldn’t be judged by those realities nor assigned expectations. After all, a person might speak Arabic and not feel connected to the Arab world and culture. And another might not speak the language and feel very linked to his/her heritage.
RZ: You’ve mentioned once in an interview that what makes us human is our ability to answer thoughtfully, and change our minds later. That resonates with many people, surely, many of whom are probably afraid to perhaps voice this resonance. What is it about changing our minds that terrifies us so much? And is this confirmation an integral part of what makes us creative? What makes writers, writers?

It doesn’t terrify all of us. I find it rather reassuring, comforting. As for what makes writers, writers. I can’t speak for all of them, I can only tell you, as a writer, I’m a romantic of sorts in search of an impossible perfect.

RZ: You have been asked this question countless times before, but I will ask you again, forgive me; how do you define yourself in terms of identity?

A Bethlehemite—who is also French and American—with Latin American, African and Asian influences. A Mediterranean who is also very much a city person.

RZ: You’ve mentioned once that, “homeland is one thing and home is another.” How so? And do you find yourself constantly in search of one or the other in your writing?

Not any more. They appear and disappear but I’m very clear on what each means to me. Home is the place I have chosen to exist in, my cities, Paris and New York. Homeland is where I am originally from, Bethlehem.

RZ: You’ve lived in Europe, the United States, the Caribbean, Latin America and the Arab world. You are of Palestinian descent and write in English. Does the Arab in you feel empowered?

I only write in English but my poems include French, Spanish and Arabic words because they are an integral part of my English or maybe I should say, the way I communicate. These languages coexist inside of me harmoniously. Speaking various languages has expanded my interior and exterior world in a multitude of fascinating ways.

RZ: In an increasingly globalized present, where the world seems to be shrinking faster than a new phone app is created (or maybe not!) and the distinctive, discerning features of each Arab culture seems to be vanishing, how can art reconcile us with the idea that we may become increasingly obsolete? (or maybe not?)

Arab or any other culture will not become obsolete. It’s our fundamental pulse, and we instinctively preserve our cultures. We re-imagine them but will not let them disappear. I don’t see the distinctive features of each Arab culture vanishing. I can recognize certain unifying spaces, especially when it comes to social media, but every Arab country is graced with its unique and ancient histories, cultures, traditions, art and literature. We continue to cherish, nourish, and add new twists to them. Even if every generation complains that certain elements of their culture have been lost, the essence remains very much alive.

RZ: How important are literary journals, if at all?

They are an important meeting field of ideas, minds and creative talent, where we communicate, challenge, change, learn, and are exposed to a constellation of voices.

RZ: What advice would you offer emerging writers?

Read as diversely as possible, and don’t be in a hurry to publish. If you persist and are dedicated, you’ll find the bus that will take you to the terminal where you’re meant to begin your writing life.