The City and the Writer

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Nathalie Handal was raised in Latin America, France and the Middle East, and educated in Asia, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Her recent poetry books include the flash collection *The Republics* (2015), winner of the Virginia Faulkner Award for Excellence in Writing, and the Arab American Book Award; the critically-acclaimed *Poet in Andalucía* (2012); and *Love and Strange Horses* (2010), winner of the Gold Medal Independent Publisher Book Award. She is the author of eight plays, editor of two anthologies, and her poetry, essays and creative nonfiction have appeared in *Vanity Fair, Guernica Magazine, The Guardian, The New York Times, The Nation, The Irish Times*, among others. Handal is the recipient of awards from The Lannan Foundation, Centro Andaluz de las Letras, Fondazione di Venezia, Emily Harvey Foundation, among others. Her work brings her to audiences globally. She lives in Rome and New York, where she is a professor at Columbia University, and writes the literary travel column “The City and the Writer” for *Words without Borders* magazine. *Le vite della pioggia*, traduzione di Marta Cariello was recently published by Iacobelli Editore, Italia (2018), and her new collection *Life in a Country Album* is forthcoming in 2019.
I have a passion for cities, their irresistible unrest, the way they make you feel unsettled yet welcomed. I also have a passion for books. It’s hard not to think of the Czech Republic when one mentions Milan Kundera. Just as it’s difficult when one mentions the mystical Tangiers to not think of Paul Bowles and his ex-patriot life among the Moroccans. Since I was young, authors and their books have made me long to visit the places and cultures described. Not just to experience the stories and people they introduced me to, but to discover the parts, certainly more vast, they couldn’t. And the secrets not published. Or, perhaps, not shared given the constraints of good storytelling. I mean, Gabriel García Márquez has given those who haven’t been to Colombia an immense insight into Bogota, but wouldn’t his recommendation and thoughts on the city reveal surprise?

In 2009, Rohan Kamicheril, then an editor at *Words without Borders*, asked me to be a contributing writer to the magazine—writing reviews, translating. I was very keen on working with WWB but wanted to participate in a different way. So I proposed the idea of writing the literary travel column “The City and the Writer,” a vibrant and wide-ranging forum for the exploration of cities through the writing of local authors. The series began on September 24, 2010, and has since featured well-known and emerging writers from around the globe.

CW is a map of architectural metaphors. A space to wander and discover curves and corridors, rooms and ruins, windows and worlds, colors and translucencies. A space to return to because each time you will find something new—an empty cove, a quieter corner, a ghost, a familiar voice, a history untold, a coliseum.

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The City and the Writer: In Homs with Marwa Al-Sabouni*

Can you describe the mood of Homs as you feel/see it?

Today the world knows of two Homses: Homs before the war and after the war. But there have always been two Homses: Homs that shows itself to you and the other that is always hiding and waiting to be discovered. The tail end of the Ottoman rule of the region marked the beginnings of the chronic schizophrenia that got hold of it, and still has hold of it. Homs is no exception.

It is a place where Sufism is the close neighbor of Marxism, lemon flowers and jasmine fragrances drift along with dust and smoke, vegetable and fruits grow in the streets of overpriced properties, and extravagant weddings and parties entertain under a ghostly night in the half dead city.

The two Homses are sometimes in sheer contrast and other times are harmonious; the old sits next to the new, as the poor do to the rich. High concrete featureless blocks share walls with black basalt courtyard houses and vaulted khans. Mosques open their modest doors, as do the churches in the same narrow alley. In Homs, people are the city, they shape its life and hidden character.

Having a good sense of humor and being easygoing are the two main characteristics people of Homs are famous for – yet don’t be fooled by those pretty faces with friendly smiles and colorful eyes, for they are more complicated than their neighbors would like to admit. With their cunning wit and rebellious characters they’ve exported famous and influential people through the city’s long history, from rulers of the ancient kingdoms to presidents of modern Syria to poets, writers, and inventors.

Perhaps the name of the city’s river, Al-Assi – which means the disobedient as it runs against gravity from south to north – is not just a coincidence. It is said that the people of Homs avoided the Mongol invasion by disguising themselves, acting crazy, and spreading the rumor that their river affected them with incurable illnesses and madness, which made the invading troops avoid the city of the mad, as they still proudly call it.

What is your most heartbreaking memory in this city?

Six years of war left me no memories. My life before is hazy. All memories of war are heartbreaking, especially because it’s ongoing and its unmerciful blade is still harvesting more and more sad memories. War has passed over Homs. It has loomed over its sky for four dark years, and now it has moved to its west where it is residing over peoples’ hearts. I have lived through the destruction of my city block by block and soul by soul. I watched havoc creep into its now destroyed streets long before the canons started announcing their final death. I witnessed the bloodshed, the murdered children and childhoods, the deported and the displaced, the hungry and the lost, the missing and the abused. I heard the mosques calling the names of the dead every few minutes for months asking for the prayers to have mercy for their souls. Winters

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brought images of the cold blue feet of the shoeless children, while summers brought suffocating boredom. I have memories of eyes filled with tears, eyes filled with fear, angry eyes, unforgiving eyes, desperate eyes, greedy eyes, creepy eyes. I try to forget them all.

What is the most extraordinary detail, one that goes unnoticed by most, of the city?

In a sense the whole city goes unnoticed. Despite its ancient architecture, pleasant weather, and wonderful food, it was off almost every tourist map before the war due to its poor public service infrastructure. It’s a mystery to me that Homs is marginalized despite its core geographical location, its cultural history, and its old architecture, dating back thousands of years before Christ – the Temples of the Sun remained sacred, turning into churches and then mosques, creating a mysterious city sadly buried under long years of abandonment.

What writer(s) from here should we read?

Nizar Qabbani (1923-98), who was concerned with social and political reform and tried to address societies’ most urgent issues philosophical and literal questions. I admire the work of Hassan Sami Youssef, a Palestinian born in 1945, who was forced to flee after the Israeli occupation of Palestine. He went to Lebanon and then Syria. His body of work combines elements of literature, movie, and theater. His emotionally effective and richly detailed drama series was shown on Syrian television for years. One of his most memorable works is the novel-series *The Waiting*, which describes Damascus in 2006 and examines the life in different urban zones, showing the limbo Syrians were living in, which to me can easily be linked to the war Syria is suffering today.

Is there a place here you return to often?

Since more than sixty percent of my city has turned into rubble, the answer is *no*. However, the city failed to capture my senses in the twenty-nine years I spent here before the war. Homs was a victim of neglect and corruption – official and local – which made it difficult to belong to. But I do cherish the days I used to run from my childhood home in Al-Waar, outside the green belt that is called The New Homs, up to the actual city, and back. It was an ascending road with orchards on either side, which I especially enjoyed on rainy days.

Is there an iconic literary place we should know?

Homs’s cultural scene has been attacked so severely it has confined the city to internal micro-circles. Almost every activity is performed indoors among the person’s inner circle. Part of this has to do with the city’s tendency not to show off and to stay loyal to the spiritual state which motivates it. This modest character is evident in every detail in city, especially the old part, where buildings are built with soft proportions and humble interiors.

Are their hidden cities within this city that have intrigued or seduced you?
Referring to the inner circles above: The city is a combination of contradictory, hidden micro-worlds. Although everyone knows everyone else’s businesses, they insist on keeping it low-key. Nevertheless, this enshrouding has a positive social quality as it has helped people to maintain their dignity and provided redemption for the misled. As an architect, I am rather intrigued by the Roman cellars and water tunnels that reportedly run underneath the city.

Where does passion live here?

Despite the leftist influence on the spiritual character of Homs, and now the war, it remains a city with religion – Muslim and Christian – at its core. Much of its once peaceful atmosphere can be explained by this. The negative effects are evident in the fading social fabric. Nevertheless, a deep spiritual passion can still be sensed in many remaining details.

What is the title of one of your works about Homs and what inspired it exactly?

The Battle for Home (Thames and Hudson, 2016) is about war and architecture. It looks at the Syrian-built environment, making a case for its vital role in creating terms for civil war and asserting that there could be a way out of its vicious cycle.

Inspired by Levi, “Outside Homs does an outside exist?”

Outside everywhere there must be an outside to exist.

Marwa Al-Sabouni earned her PhD in Architecture at Al-Baath University. Her work has been published in RIBAJ, Architectural Review, Wall Street International Magazine, among others. She is the author of The Battle for Home (Thames and Hudson, 2016). This work has been widely covered in the media, including The Guardian, The Financial Times, the Times, The Huffington Post, the New York Times, and BBC Radio(s) several flagship programs. She has participated in UN-organized conferences and workshops regarding the postwar situations in Syria, Berlin, Beirut, and Geneva. In 2014, Al-Sabouni won first place on the national level in the UN-Habitat Competition for the rehabilitation of mass housing for her design proposal for rebuilding Baba Amr in Homs. She runs, with her partner, the Arabic Gate for Architectural News (www.arch-news.net), the world’s first and only website dedicated to architectural news in Arabic and the winner of the Royal Kuwaiti award for best media project in the Arab World, 2010. She also teaches architectural design in a private university in Hama, Syria.
The City and the Writer: In Naples with Erri De Luca*

Can you describe the mood of Naples as you feel/see it?

Napoli was founded by Greeks, not Neapolitans. They built it on a seismic foundation and under a catastrophic volcano. So Neapolitans are – along with other people of this world – inhabiting a game of chance. For this reason their patron saint and guardian, San Gennaro, specializes in eruptions. When flaming lava would close in on the city, our people would take the saint’s statue and lead a procession to meet the eruption. The miracle of stopping the lava would happen. This is the city I come from, where suitcases sit next to the door, ready to take flight.

What is your most heartbreaking memory in this city?

The children of Napoli: when I was among them, the children of Napoli died like flies – the city had the highest infant mortality rate in Europe. They were dying from cold, hunger, sickness, beatings. The ones who didn’t die went off to work, not to school. Their cries shaped my nervous system.

What is the most extraordinary detail, one that goes unnoticed by most, of the city?

Insomnia: Napoli doesn’t close for the night, it never sleeps.

What writer(s) from here should we read?

The poets in dialect from first half of the last century: Salvatore Di Giacomo, Ernesto Murolo, Raffaele Viviani, and, for the stage, Eduardo De Filippo.

Is there a place here you return to often?

On the Via Mezzocannone, to my friend’s, the bookseller Raimondo Di Maio. His bookstore is called Libreria Dante & Descartes. He knows and can find for customers any title, from any year whatsoever, in Italian. He’s the last of a dying breed: the omniscient bookseller.

Is there an iconic literary place we should know?

The fortress of Saint Elmo, the city’s only castle, where you can admire the whole gulf, far from the noise of traffic.

Are there hidden cities within this city that have intrigued or seduced you?

Underground Napoli is empty. Excavations to quarry tuff began with the Greeks. Napoli is a double city: above ground it’s packed, overcrowded, yet below it’s deserted, riddled with caves, tunnels, crawl spaces. Today one can visit the underground city. From there it’s clear that every Neapolitan, not just the city, has a secret compartment.

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Where does passion live here?

In each alleyway of the old city people have had homes forever; they’ve never let themselves be moved out, for any sort of urban planning project. In other cities the center has been emptied of people and filled with offices. Not in Napoli, where the center has kept its dense population for centuries, for generations.

What is the title of one of your works about Napoli and what inspired it exactly?

Il giorno prima della felicità (The Day Before Happiness, Penguin UK, 2016). I tell the story of the Neapolitan popular insurrection against the Germans in September, 1943. In four days of revolt, the Neapolitan people succeeded on their own in driving out the German army. The Americans entered Napoli without having to fire a single shot.

Inspired by Levi, “Outside Napoli does an outside exist?”

I was born and grew up there, until the age of eighteen. Outside Napoli the rest of the world is simply a somewhere else than Napoli. I tore myself out of the city like a tooth pulled of its gums. A tooth has roots that won’t reroot in some other mouth. I’ve stayed that way, a tooth wobbling on roots left out in the open.

Translated from the Italian by Jim Hicks.

Erri De Luca was born in Naples in 1950 and is one of Italy’s best-known novelists, poets, essayists, and translators. He has published more than sixty books, numerous collections of short stories and poems, that have been translated in more than thirty languages. He is self-taught in Swahili, Russian, Yiddish, and Ancient Hebrew, and has translated several books of the Ancient Covenant. His first novel, Non ora, non qui (Not Here, Not Now), was published in Italy in 1989. He was awarded the France Culture Prize in 1994 for Aceto, arcobaleno, the Laure Bataillon Award in 2002 for Tre cavalli (Three Horses), and the Femina Etranger for Montedidio (God’s Mountain). In 2010 he was awarded the German International Literary Petrarca Award. He wrote and starred in several films and plays, including the theatrical drama In viaggio con Aurora (Traveling with Aurora). De Luca contributes regularly to several newspapers and magazines. He is a passionate mountain climber. He lives in Rome.