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LAUDATORY SPEECH FOR EMILY NASRALLAH BY EMILY DISCHE-BECKER

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In an open letter, an American professor who recently completed a stint teaching at the American University of Beirut concluded: "It's no surprise that the city inspires so much reflection. It's nearly impossible to live in Beirut without a desire to compose letters of love and complaint to faraway audiences."

I doubt that Emily Nasrallah embarked on a career as a writer with the aspiration of wooing an audience in Weimar, Germany with tales from her native homeland. Indeed it is a peculiar blessing to be honored for one's work in a place where it can only be appraised in translation, and where the intimate and often critical portrayal of social relations are subject to such rampant preconceptions about an entire region and its people. It isn't the courage to face the muster and judgment of international critics that defines Nasrallah's work, but what her writing signified in her native Lebanon.

As I thought about honoring her life's work here today, I was reminded of a recent essay by the young Lebanese writer Lina Mounzer on translating the stories of women from war-torn Syria: *Translation is not just about transposing words from one language to another. But transplanting a feeling, a way of seeing the world, from one vocabulary of experience to another...In Arabic, the word for the action of transplantation is zara'. Simply to plant. There is no prefix implying movement from one place to another, an in-built warning of possible rejection. There is only the thing itself, planted, as if the process of its life begins all at once in this new soil, this new body. I prefer this way of thinking about translated words, and the possibility of their finding life. But the conditions of growth, for growth, remain the same. There are still no guarantees that anything will take root, or that the new body will not reject the new organ for being foreign.*

This uprooting, through voluntary or involuntary departure, is a consistent theme throughout Nasrallah's work. The anguish of those left behind, the alienation of the departed in their new surroundings and the ultimate impossibility of return. Displacement is an essential part of the Lebanese collective experience and it is relevant as ever, in light of the mass displacement from neighboring Syria today.

Lebanon is a tiny heterogeneous and notoriously fractious nation united by a few things: pride in its exquisite cuisine, a mastery of improvised survival strategies, and the prolonged absence of family members. With a diaspora five times the size of its resident population, everyone is missing someone – fathers, siblings, lovers, old friends whose remittances keep entire families and the national economy afloat. During holidays, of which there are many thanks to its multiplicity of faiths, the country's population swells, its infrastructure literally buckles as the Lebanese return home – only to leave again.

This routine coming and going produces many perks, such as a general lenience on baggage restrictions. On the trice-weekly direct flights from Beirut to Berlin, which is jokingly called the “Number 4 van” with wings, older women heave baskets of oranges back for their grandchildren in Berlin. As a result, Lebanon’s single international airport is arguably the country’s most important institution. And it is, like the descriptions of village life in Emily Nasrallah’s early works, a time portal of nostalgia – upon landing, Fairuz croons from the airplane intercom; images of pre-war dapper downtown line the terminals, and a pre-recorded announcement warns that is strictly prohibited to smoke, but only “while walking through the terminal”. Who controls the airport, controls the state. Who besieges the airport holds an entire population hostage. Flocks of birds attracted to a garbage dump near the airport recently imperiled landing airplanes, threatening to tear apart every single family.

The Lebanese diasporic itch dates back 150 years, but reached its critical peak during the civil war from 1975 to 1990. During that brutal conflict, the setting of some of her better known works, Emily Nasrallah’s house was bombed three times. And yet she stubbornly remained in Lebanon, avoiding the fate of her characters who like Radwan in *Flight against Time*, follows his children to Canada during the civil war, but cannot find fulfillment or a sense of belonging there.

At first glance, Nasrallah’s work seems to fit comfortably within a literary tradition that idealizes village life. The descriptions of doors flung open, the scent of coffee wafting through the streets, generous helpings of sweets, the communal rites of harvest, a steady reverse remittance of olives, dates, stuffed and pickled vegetables, carried aboard busses and planes to absent sons. But amidst all these enticing descriptions, there is a jarring fateful cruelty that squashes the desires, particularly of young women, the main protagonists of Nasrallah’s work, to determine their own destinies.

Nasrallah’s rich imagery and sensuous descriptions of pastoral life have been called “Mountain Romanticism” or “Mountain Nationalism” – a motif that carries a whiff of nostalgia for simpler times. In the 1960s, when Emily Nasrallah published her first novel “September Birds”, Lebanon was in the throes of a rural flight that she herself took part in, as thousands of people – overwhelmingly men – made their way to the capital to earn a living, leaving the women behind.

Emily Nasrallah’s own extraordinary biography gives us some insight into the themes that permeate her work: born in 1931 into a Christian family of farmers in Kfeir, a mountainous village in South Lebanon, she was enrolled at school at the young age of four. At age nine, she left home to attend boarding school. She was the first woman from her village to attend university. Among the circumstances that shaped her trajectory as a writer, she has cited her fortuitous exposure to literature through an engaged teacher, the material support of an educated uncle who enrolled her in boarding school, and a maternal grandmother with a knack for oral storytelling.

There were painful formative moments, too, that helped propel her away, toward the city where she began a career as a journalist. When she was 18, Nasrallah’s fiancé passed away from leukemia. To avoid the pitiful glances of neighbors, she left for Beirut. There she married and had her first child while at university, where she studied education, and began writing for magazines and publications.

In 1959, the editor of “Assayyad” magazine dispatched Nasrallah, then a staff writer, to cover the wedding of the late Shah of Iran to his third wife; Nasrallah refused the

assignment. Not because of the Shah's policies of political repression, but out of solidarity with the Shah's second ex-wife, Thurayya, whom he had divorced after she failed to bear him an heir. (This courageous stance would have elicited great sympathy in Germany at the time, where the Shah's divorce created a tabloid storm and became the topic of a Schlager song: *Schenkst du dem Schah kein Söhnchen, dann stösst er dich from Tröhnchen.*)

Similarly, the rebellions of Nasrallah's female characters do not follow ideological trajectories. Their struggles are waged on behalf of their own desire for freedom and self-determination, and are sometimes tragically thwarted even by the women closest to them.

Despite her characters being women, whose freedom is never fully realized due to social and familial constraints, Emily Nasrallah has said that she is not a feminist writer. Perhaps this is a defiance of categorization; or, as she has indicated, it is because she sees the rigid constraints of patriarchy as afflicting not only women but also men. There are no elaborately contrived plot twists to underline arguments, and few happy endings.

In Germany today, Emily Nasrallah's stories may especially resonate with its newest wave of immigrants, many of whom have arrived here with little in the way of possessions, but memories and a language - which they share with Emily Nasrallah.

It takes courage to write about home, as Emily Nasrallah does, with both affection and honesty, to weave the intimate particularities of customs, the disappointments and sacrifices of its women into stories that may fail to pass state censors but resonate with generations of readers. I am honored to have been given the opportunity to make this tribute to her today.