

Michaux, of whom Malcolm Bowie has written, “Michaux, for all his talents as a narrator finds himself bound to invent countless small structures which cannot endure from one creative occasion to the next.” Richard Ellmann, also writing of Michaux, could as readily be describing Kharms: “While obviously a skilled and conscientious craftsman, he insists upon a kind of amateur standing in the writing profession; his work must always be spontaneous, never *voulu*.”

Nothing Kharms ever did was *voulu*. Rather, he wrote as a reflexive practice in response to his immediate environment. His notebooks suggest that, for him, the notion of the professional writer who sits at a writing desk for a fixed period each day was unappealing, perhaps impossible. Kharms was an amateur, in part, because of his avoidance of this too deliberate type of compositional approach. Kharms’s was instead one of constant movement, directed mainly toward his limited circle of intimates and colleagues. Had he wished to create work that could reach a larger audience, he would have needed to meet rigid formal as well as ideological requirements, in the very way that writers in modern-day capitalist countries must meet the comparably rigid demands of the market. Because he was not interested in producing ideological works of instrumental value, Kharms’s example sharply contrasts with that of the Soviet literary establishment of his time. Yet neither is it comparable to that of the American establishment writer, who succumbs to producing works that satisfy existing literary markets. Kharms’s uncompromising amateurism should serve today’s artists as an atypical example of artistic autonomy. Since he was an amateur above all else, Kharms let his personal vision dictate the shape of his work.

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Etel Adnan, *Premonition*. Berkeley: Kelsey Street Press, 2014. 56pp. \$19

Etel Adnan’s massive and diverse body of work is dedicated to other possibilities of knowing. Some possibilities include writing from the perspective of the other, as in her celebrated novel about the Lebanese Civil War, *Sitt Marie Rose* (1978); becoming a mountain as one paints it, as in *Journey to Mount Tamalpais* (1986); or staring into a dying sun as it bears witness to the crises of the Middle East, as in *The Arab Apocalypse* (1989). *Premonition* comes as the most recent product of nearly half a century of such works. Unlike Adnan’s earlier books, it is less tied to particular human conflicts, though it most certainly is born in their aftermath, as well as in the context of continuing ecological calamities. Still, it would serve as a valuable introduction for those unfamiliar with her oeuvre to the radical forms of perception by which Adnan seeks to tackle questions of being. And like her most recent books of poetry,

Seasons (2008) and *Sea and Fog* (2012), it pushes the form of the prose poem further toward a hybrid of poetry and philosophy. In *Premonition*, Adnan does something rare for contemporary poetry, marking out a field of ethical inquiry in which poetry's enterprise is as much looking to the future as it is to the past, in which poetry is, without either abject irony or preemptive elegy, a future thinking.

"There's always a conductive thread through space for an untenable position." So begins *Premonition*. This book-length prose poem does little in the way of warning, as the title suggests it might, but it does think about the future, the "untenable position" that seems improbable and abstract until we are in it. Indeed, so much about future thinking is odd and unlikely. For George Steiner, the act of future thinking is possible only among humans, and in some sense it is responsible for humanity itself, since "futurity is a necessary condition of ethical being." For Adnan, then, something immense is at stake when she writes, "one by one we shall disappear, make room for others." The future tense admits certainty and authority—indeed, an authorship of what is to be, yet is impossible to know. But one consequence of that certain and authoritative thinking may be a vision of the world in which an "untenable position" is reserved precisely for human life, subject to the total ecology. If one takes the "untenable position" to be a kind of beyond-space or beyond-time, an unknown, then it is thinking—a "conductive thread"—that drives one impossibly toward it.

Adnan takes a distinctly posthuman stance in *Premonition*, putting human and nonhuman consciousness to work collaboratively in an investigation of time, space, being, love, and death. Indeed, time and space are difficult to pull apart in this book, which is unmarked by paragraphs and illustrated by gray painted streaks that move horizontally across its opening and closing pages, disappearing into their edges. These streaks enact the continuity of the poem, its simulation of an endless temporality and a state of perpetual journeying. The speaker of this poem often appears to be walking, whether it's through a Paris or California neighborhood (Paris and Sausalito being two of Adnan's more permanent homes) or "in the meanders of Asia's rice fields." The landscape—its horizons and reliefs, the stop signs of topography—inaugurates and shapes thinking: "Beyond, there's solidity, a mountain. My fluidity is measured by what seems not to move." This mountain must be Mount Tamalpais, which Adnan has painted for decades, in a bright, clean near-abstraction. Its constancy routes and reroutes the onlooker's thinking. Here Adnan's love for the nonhuman takes on an ethical force, subverting the hegemony of the human:

The mineral world is probably more capable of intelligence than we are. But how can anyone know? Pink granite shows splinters of

light which are its ecstasies. That's what it means to be lonely...a familiarity with the essential loneliness of other forms of life.

Thinking occurs in a body-mind wandering and stopping through geographies both local and global. Later in the poem, Adnan writes, "I am not at home." It is equally plausible to say that she is *never* at home, that wandering and exile (chosen or not) are essential to her work. In this context, there are always borders—of time, of space—toward which consciousness moves. Words such as "limits," "limitations," "horizon," "walls," and "harbors" are thus critical to Adnan. They plot the impossible lines that thinking must broach and surpass.

When Adnan writes, "Always elsewhere one should be," she marks out the goal of always wandering, always essaying. And the form this wandering takes is the sentence. Adnan's sentences are aphoristic. They are sentences in the classical, Latin sense of the word. Defined not by laws of grammar or syntax but by their capacity to convey sense, these are wise sayings, uttered with authority. The declarative, precise, and even irksome qualities of the *sententia* are everywhere present in *Premonition*:

To sleep standing up is an asceticism that affirms its own verticality.

[...]

There is such a number of roads, but they seem to cancel each other.

[...]

You can't be surprised to find out that you're unstable; it's in the nature of things, of that order which is a gigantic disorder.

[...]

Being and life celebrated a marriage at their very beginning, while death is a bachelor.

The sentence-as-thought is foreign because it is slippery. At times, it takes you forward; at others, it contradicts itself, turns backward or inward, placing paradox back in the center of sense. Adnan herself jokes about this phenomenon: "Sentences behave like walls, or bump into them." But what is most slippery, disorienting, and destination-less about her sentences is the way they connect—or don't—to one another. There are moments of sentence-to-sentence integration in *Premonition*, providing glimpses of story,

setting, or discourse, but more often the text reads like a string of aphoristic statements loosely connected by association. Occasionally, we aren't even sure how strong a particular association is meant to be. "Sentences behave like walls," for example, is followed by the sentence, "One bleeds." Is it a sentence that bleeds, or an unrelated "one"—a human being, perhaps the one reading the sentence? The violence here is comical but tragic, too, for Adnan points to language's dual ability to refuse sense (sentences "behave like walls") and to make too much sense (sentences "bump into" each other, or we make them do so).

Paradoxically, Adnan matches her embrace of slipperiness in language—and consciousness—with a tone of certitude. On the same page, the poet says, "I felt afraid of the horizon," and "I refused failure." Such confidence is increasingly rare in contemporary poetry, and it brings us to the point in *Premonition* that is most like a foreknowledge: the certainty that human life will end and "make room for others" while "the universe, yes, will go on." So death is the certainty of the future. But the death of humanity is not a disaster—or if it is, it is not to be bemoaned. The universe is indispensable; humanity isn't. This is also the point where Adnan's future thinking shows itself to be especially radical. The poet does not envision a better future for herself or for her species. Rather, she states what appears to her as inevitable: not progress towards utopia but regression and self-destruction. For Adnan, death is both inevitable and ecstatic (from the Greek, "to put out of place"):

I am the tempest and I am the night. More than a night of storms.
A fusion of both that produces a third element: energy that will
join other ones; but I will not be here to know it. Neither will you.
Each one of you an explosion. Sometimes, a dazzling thrust of joy.
Why not?

Here, then, is the new sense of the word "premonition": it is an apocalypse, a seeing beyond disaster. It is an impossible task, yet thinking undertakes it. To think *what would it be like* fills Adnan with the joy of wonder. What in another poet might have been a concern for one's mortality manifests in Adnan as a curiosity and a pleasure, not in immortality, but in other forms of life, in other possibilities of knowing.

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