

1981

Death and Lebanon

Barbara Bedway

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bedway, Barbara. "Death and Lebanon." *The Iowa Review* 12.1 (1981): 50-58. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.2824>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Death and Lebanon · *Barbara Bedway*

Ohio

Mashaya ruins the night for everyone, both aunts say it has to stop. After dinner they find her sitting on our bed already in her nightgown, dark circles under her wide green eyes. Aunt Philamena says tell us, *habibti*, what do you see? Tree shadows? Branches against the window pane?

The dark hair swings no from side to side.

Something you hear, then? The backyard dogs howling, your old aunt here snoring? Maybe Mr. Truskaloski upstairs hacking out his lungs? No?

No.

Mashaya, child, something makes you scream.

Sitting in our bedroom window I watch the bonfire in the yard across the alley. With my cheek against the cold pane of glass I see our neighbor wrapped in shawls bringing food on a plate to her dogs. They leap up in their chains. The high-pitched barking goes on and on. If our aunts weren't watching, Mashaya would be in the window with me, watching that fire in the tall metal drum.

You tell me, Ajunya, Philamena says, what can I do now?

At home I am Ajunya and Marcia is Mashaya, but only at home. In the Miner's Supply my aunt calls me Angie; it's Marcia who stocks the shelves. To her customers my aunt speaks Polish, Russian, a little Greek. Her sister Hikmet gets by with just Italian. Everyone here came from somewhere else but my sister and I are the newest: two years here from the Lebanon, because of the events. I was nine and Mashaya eleven when we came with our sita, called grandmother here, to live with her daughters in America. At night I sit in our window and think of Beirut: the flashes of light, the ten-second count to the artillery's boom.

Ajunya, are you listening? *Look* at your room. What can I do that I haven't done? What?

We live with bare walls and a bare floor; all pictures, mirrors, crucifixes got put away and their ghosts with them. Because of Mashaya's dreams our aunts hang up every piece of clothing, never move the furniture when they clean; leave the dresser top, the floor, the chairs bare of anything that in the night could become the head or neck or arm of a stranger. Mashaya told them: his nose is twisted in the crucifix, his eyes

shine out of the mirror. Sometimes there is no stranger but something else. Still, Philamena has to open the closet door to poke for hiding strangers, then shut it so the hanging clothes can't shape themselves into the wrinkles on an arm, a face, the back of a huge hand.

Well?

Xaala, I don't know.

Mashaya, look at me, even your sister can't tell what it is, she sleeps right next to you. At least she's trying to. Everyone has to sleep, child. Mashaya, can't you *look* at me?

Philamena slaps her reddened hands against her black dress. She is so tired from these interrupted nights that her heavy body sags and her legs and ankles swell. Aunt Hikmet, thin and belted inside her own black dress, tells her beads in the doorway.

Mashaya, Mashaya.

Philamena hugs my sister, whose face disappears in the dark woolen sleeves. Outside the bonfire is low. It will die before Mashaya can watch it.

Aunt Hikmet brings her rosary into our room. She kneels on the rugless floor and we face her. I hear the crack of my sister's bony ankles. She smiles at me and tucks her nightgown under her knees. Philamena leans on my shoulder and groans to her knees. Beads click. We pray.

We pray hail marys for the dead: for our mother, who died having me; and for our sita, whose life gave out once she got us, safe and sound, to America. We pray for who's not dead but dying, the old women Hikmet visits in their homes every week, nuns and widows giving out after years of a life in Christ. We pray for the Lebanon and all the true Lebanese, the believers in Christ, who must not give out until peace comes to the country at last.

Amen, Hikmet says, while my sister's lips are still moving. She's forming silent words to someone, to God or whoever it is, to keep our father from giving out in the Lebanon.

In bed we listen to the sound of our aunt's slippers scuffling down the hallway. We count one minute and hear the creak of their beds. Mashaya reaches for her shoebox from under the bed and I pick up the rosewater bottle by the bedpost. We rub the rosewater into our skin and we sniff each other.

That's good, Mashaya says, and hooking her long hair behind each ear, she bends over her dusty box. Some nights she needs to look and

some nights she leaves it alone, but for sleeping she always needs the rosewater smell and the sight of its thick blue bottle.

I hold the flashlight pen while she sifts through her treasures from the Lebanon. There's dirt and broken glass and Sita's hypodermic needle for her insulin. In a rubber band Mashaya keeps strips of posters she tore off the walls of Beirut. She has eyes and hair and lips and shoulders from a hundred different boys, boys whose families plastered their pictures all over the city to honor their sons dead in the events. The boys might have been kidnapped or died fighting in the streets but it's Mashaya who keeps them, their creased smiles and folded eyes.

Hold this, she says, and hands me a strip of wide forehead.

Somewhere in the box she thinks there is a whole face but we haven't found it yet. Once our sita said we were close, we almost had it, but the eyes looked in different directions.

Let's give up, I tell her. Nothing looks right tonight.

Hold the flashlight closer.

The pieces are getting too crinkley to see.

You're not even looking.

I'm tired of looking.

Then we'll never find anything.

She puts back the lid and folds her hands on top of it. I tug at the blanket and wait. She won't look by herself. Sita helped when I wouldn't but Sita died months ago so it has to be me now. I know I should search more but my eyes are too heavy, they close when I tell them not to.

Can we sleep now? I ask her.

I never sleep. She leans down to slide the box under the bed.

You do sleep. You have to. You dream.

I dream with my eyes open.

The dreams began after Sita died. For the week she was sick Mashaya sat beside her next to the trays of pills and needles. It was summer, the hot air thick with unfallen rain, but Sita was keeping us indoors. She watched and worried in her bed damp with sweat. She yelled *y'allah, y'allah, get inside*, and pointed toward the ceiling where she said she saw a locusts' swarm. Hikmet ran for the doctor but Mashaya closed the window and started to shake. Sita called her Melania, our mother's name, and pulled off the cloth Mashaya tried to press to her forehead.

Melania, she said, her gray hair loose and damp across the pillow, get inside. Locusts are the teeth of the wind.

Beirut

Papa and his cousin Faisz sit at the kitchen table, talking in French about guns. Both prefer to speak in French. They say the true Lebanese are Europeans by way of the Phoenicians. We have no relatives in France but Papa is proud to have two sisters-in-law who live in America. He sends us there once a year for a month, where he forbids us to speak any Arabic.

Sita laughs at the two men. She calls them *Mughnuuni*, crazy ones, and scrubs her pans viciously. Mashaya dries them and hums to herself over the names and numbers of guns we all know by heart: Katushka, Kalishnokov, Duska; American M-16s, Czech M-58s.

I know Papa is sad he has no sons to help him defend the Lebanon. He is handsome in his olive-green army uniform of the *phalanges libanaises*; his high black boots, the beret atop black hair cropped close to the scalp. He has a plan to get to the teenagers firing a 122-millimeter gun from the Cercle de la Renaissance sportive. The boys fire round after round into the Christian section, then they strut—Faisz gets up to show us their strut, with his hands high on his hips—they strut free as birds across the Avenue de Paris and jump for a swim into the Mediterranean. Faisz says sometimes they pick up rackets for a quick game on the tennis courts nearby.

There are battles all over the city and my father has chosen his. He and Faisz fold up their paper and diagrams and pick up their M-16s.

Au revoir, Papa says, kissing Sita.

Ma issalame, she answers, facing her dishes.

Papa slams the door.

Remember, Sita tells us, untying the clean white rag from around her grey bun and sinking into a chair, just remember. The French say *merde* for shit but believe me, it still smells the same.

She turns on the radio for Sharif Akhaoui's daily report. He used to give rush-hour traffic reports but now he tells where the roadblocks are and what bridges are safe to cross.

Today, he is saying, you would be mad to go out. The gunmen are everywhere, every street is dangerous. Do not go out. Do not even try to.

Sometimes we listen to Akhaoui for hours while Sita stares at the radio. Today he is naming street after street. No pharmacies opened, no bakeries. *Do not go out*. People telephone him with new sniping in Ashrafiyeh, with kidnappings in Ain al-Rummaneh. He repeats every ambush, every kidnapping.

Sita keeps one hand on mine and an arm around Mashaya. No one touches the dial. Akhaoui's voice gets higher and louder. He screams by the end of the day.

Mashaya's job is to set the trash on fire. Just before curfew at seven o'clock she runs out to the street with a few drops of kerosene and lights the tips of the garbage. While the fire is spreading she tries, quick as she can, to pull what she wants: broken bottles, bloody scarves, twisted pieces of metal. She won't touch moldy bread and she hates the daytime, when flies stay round the piles of trash and keep even the cats away. I don't like the nights when the sky glows red from tracer bullets and we hear rats in the cellar where we sleep on a mattress by the stairs. The rats make a soft, scuffling sound that doesn't worry my sister. She says if you can hear them they're not near you yet.

When our neighbor Mr. Helou left the city, he took a wide glass jar filled with dirt from his home in the mountains. Mashaya keeps bits of crumbling stone from the porch outside in a shoebox beside our mattress. What she pulls from the trash she lines up in a corner and shows me before we sleep. She loves hard things with jagged edges, blackened in parts by fire. In the dark she gives me a sliver of glass and I do what she wants me to do. My fingers curl tight around it; she squeezes my hand with hers. When I open it up my hand is bleeding.

Mesquina, poor thing, Mashaya says, and taking back the sliver of glass she covers the cut with her mouth.

Sita says we are going to America. It's early morning and we're sitting in the kitchen where it's still dark. Yesterday the lights flickered out and for the first time did not come back on. When the telephone is working, Sita is busy calling, making her plans. We have to get to Cyprus and we need gold. A cousin's wife's brother is taking a boat in two days and he wants gold. While she's talking, Sita drinks her *arak* with vodka because there's no water and there's no bread either. She won't let us go to the bank building downtown and take water from its oriental fish pond, as certain neighbors have done. But she hands us dried figs to suck on while she cradles the phone to her ear. I chew and chew to make the most juice I can, but the taste is still bitter smoke from the garbage fires and dust from the April *khamsin*.

All week clouds of yellow dust have blown across the city, settling onto the still bodies left in the street and seeping past the newspapers

taped over our broken windows. The dust keeps Mashaya moving from room to room, shaking herself and kicking at the choking air. She stops when we hear roosters crowing outside; she says we could be in the mountains if we shut our eyes, listen to those roosters and the quiet of no cars moving in the street. By the living room window we shut our eyes and hear Sita yelling from the kitchen.

It's too early but already there is the crack and whoomph and boom of the fighting from the city center. We hear gunmen scuttling over the walls and into the empty streets. They wear thick ski masks and run with their guns pointing to the sky. Sita slams down the phone and shouts for us to get into the cellar. She stays on the top step because she's never able to make the climb back up from below. With both hands she helps herself sit down near the wall. Missiles fizz through the air. Sita's voice is tired and hoarse.

I think we have a boat for this week-end, she says. Girls, can you hear me? That's two days. You can stand anything for two days.

Your boat is Anthony Quinn's yacht, Papa says, stepping into the kitchen as Sita slams the living room door and stays behind it. You'll go out with *le tout Beirut*. Tell them, Faisz, tell them what a boat that is.

Faisz says that is quite a boat. It's going to have a swimming pool and possibly two. The boat leaves from Jounieh, and in Jounieh all the shops are open and the streets are clean. People dance by candlelight in the Four Seasons Hotel.

I ought to be recuperating in Jounieh, Faisz says, holding up his bandaged hand. He and Papa have dark bristle all over their faces and they smell like the smoke of hashish. It's quiet again, still as mornings used to be. Papa comes back only in the quiet. He's brought bottled water and bread from Damascus. The wooden part of his rifle gleams around the sticker of St. Theresa holding a cross.

When you come back from America, Papa says, Jounieh is where we'll live. He hands each of us a gold coin with a reindeer on one side and tells us to hide it from Sita.

This is to help you come home, in case I can't get there myself you'll have money to get your own tickets.

Pierre, Faisz says, what are you doing that for? They could get stopped and searched on the way to the boat, someone might think they have more somewhere else.

Mashaya starts crying into Papa's shoulder. His uniform is rough but she stays there with her head down and tugs at the buttons. Papa says we won't get stopped, it's taken care of. Faisz reaches for me.

Do you know why you have to go away, *habibti*? he asks, gathering me carefully into his arms. It's because of war, you have to understand war. Everyone looks dangerous now, even children. We were on sentry duty this morning, your father and I, and we saw an old man in slippers alone in the street. Your father looked through his binoculars and said he *seemed* empty-handed, but your father had to shoot him anyway. Now, do you know why he did that?

Mashaya burrows into Papa's uniform. She says nothing and I don't want to.

Tell them, Pierre, Faisz says.

Papa is trying to smoothe the thick tangles in Mashaya's long hair. His wiggling fingers try to work their way through the clumps, but can't.

I know where the man lived, Papa says. He wasn't going to make it anyway.

Be serious, Faisz says, stroking my arm with his bandaged hand.

Papa says, I am.

Papa said we were needed for a maneuver.

He came into the basement with his flashlight and put his face next to ours. He still smelled of hashish and his reddened eyes were large. Mashaya jammed the lid onto her shoebox but our father was not looking there.

Hurry, he said, everyone has to help. Even old women like your sita are helping but Sita's asleep, she's had too much *arak* today.

At the top of the stairs we looked in on her, asleep on Mashaya's bed. She's out for the night, Papa said.

We stumbled in the dark to the front door and Papa lit a cigarette with one precious match. In the flare I saw Mashaya with her hands in fists staring ahead at the door. There were two soft taps. Papa stooped to kiss us.

This lady is Mr. Helou's aunt, he said. You do what she says and you'll be back before curfew. Ajunya, stop smiling, there's nothing funny about this.

I did feel my mouth stretched wide but I wasn't smiling. I tried to believe my body was nothing, that I could get through the streets like air breathed out of a chest. My chest felt so tight it seemed only the thinnest breath could escape.

Papa opened the door and gave us to the old woman standing there. She had thick hands like Sita's and dressed like her in a black dress and a rag around her head. She carried a small shovel and told us to say nothing until we got where we needed to be. Papa touched her shoulder and said he had to meet Faisz. He picked up his gun and disappeared into the dark.

The old woman led us down two dark streets where nothing moved. A match flared in an alleyway but no hand seemed to hold it. We stopped at a building site near the corner. Mashaya let go of my hand. More women with children came out of the side streets and alleys; everyone holding shovels, trowels, dust pans.

Do this, the woman told us, pulling a sandbag from the pile of them and holding it out in front of her. We each took a side of the bag while she shoveled dirt from the site into it. I heard her breathing hard and praying in French under her breath. My hands shook and I dropped the bag twice but Mr. Helou's aunt muttered I know, I know, and picked my side up for me. Mashaya's hands were still as she stared at the thickening bag. When it was filled we laid it aside and filled another, then another, until our arms were aching and our breaths were loud in our ears. Two boys pushing a wheelbarrow helped us toss our bags in with others.

Now run, the woman told us. It's one street down and one street over.

People we couldn't see were scurrying into the alleys and buildings. Mashaya and I ran, holding each other's slippery hand and stumbling over the rubble. Behind us we heard the crack of a rifle but we were standing up so we ran on. I thought of invisible things, of a breath that breathes on and a look without eyes. Then my chest was so tight I could think of nothing and held tighter to Mashaya's hand.

We got one street over and our house was easy to find. Sita had put a forbidden candle in the window, and was waiting.

Who told you to go outside?

She pinched me, pulled me through the doorway and yanked Mashaya in by her hair.

Who? Your father?

She cursed and slapped Mashaya, who started to laugh and fell down on her knees, laughing harder. Sita slapped her again and cursed our father, the Lebanon, and Jesus Christ. An explosion too near the back of the house stopped her.

Y'allah, y'allah, get downstairs.

She blew out the candle and groped for our hands. Mashaya was still laughing.

Sita is so confused this early morning.

While the taxi waits, she rushes around the kitchen and bedrooms, swiping at dust with a rag and fluffing up the pillows. She curses the squatters who took over Mr. Helou's house, then says it can't be helped. But they let their goats wander along the balconies; they cook their meals on the floor. Enough, enough, it doesn't matter. Get your sister, it's time to go.

After five minutes she finds us in our bedroom, where Mashaya is stuffing strips of paper into the sides of her suitcase. Her blue sweater is grimy and stained and it smells like smoke from the fire she set this morning. She won't brush her hair and she won't take off that sweater.

What, child, is this?

Sita picks among the folded clothes in the suitcase, finding dirt and broken glass and pieces of twisted metal. She takes Mashaya's face in her hands and looks a long time into her eyes.

Mesquina, poor thing, she says, but Mashaya pulls away. She runs past me and I brush at the ashes that settled onto her hair.

Don't touch me, she says. I'm burning.

Ohio

Saturdays Philamena works in the store and Hikmet takes my sister to the counselor. I make tea for Mashaya and pour in lots of milk. She stirs it, the spoon goes round and round. Hikmet from the porch yells *y'allah, y'allah*. Mashaya shrugs and brushes past. She leaves her rosewater smell.

Alone in the kitchen I push back the curtains and put three plates in the sink. By the window I say my prayer. *Beirut*. God, let it be like this:

The first time Papa comes back from maneuvers, I say, Don't come in. I say, Father, if you come in, the kitchen chair where you sat with your maps won't sit still for you anymore. If you come back, the table will collapse, the edge where you rest your hand will bend and the legs fold under. Don't try to come in. The door won't let you, the knob that you twist won't turn in to us, won't give us away. God, let Sita be in her place at the sink and Mashaya will be at the window. Let everything here be what belongs, water in jars and bread flat and white on the table. God, God, let here be where Sita does not die, where Mashaya stands wiping our plates in the light of the open window.