Lebanon Days and the ethics of thinking back

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The last time I was on this stage, I was running a grubby empire of sweatshops and sham beggars in the slums of Victorian London while singing disdainful cabaret, in a production of *The Threepenny Opera*. It was the last in a number of plays in which I had been cast over the years, and which I absolutely adored. Coming back to this spot never seemed likely. It is just as moving as meeting again so many teachers and peers from those years, all of whom I remember with gratitude. I would like to mention two teachers who are no longer with us and whose influence was especially strong. One is Mr Kevin McCaskill, my Third Form History teacher, whose booming voice, volcanic laugh and keen eye for the preposterous made his lessons unpredictable and edgy, and whose demand for diligence and coherence in written work set a gold standard of discipline. (I have never forgotten the warning that accompanied the instructions for a major history research assignment: 'Ornate decoration is unnecessary and will not disguise a weak text.' Those are words to live by.) The other is Mrs Ann Parker, my Fourth Form English teacher and then-head of English, a remarkable person of great warmth and strength, and a mentor to many, who balanced firmness with a straightforward faith: if you could make or do something interesting, you should – and she would care to support and advise you in doing so. Mrs Parker was a stalwart at times of stress and insecurity (not only for me, I am sure) and I have always wanted to write something in her memory, but in the twenty-two years since she died I have never hit on the right idea. Perhaps this is it.

I dwell on what I owe to Grammar because the experiences I am about to describe have roots here. Experiences, not stories. Stories make sense in their own skins. Their shapes grow by selection and calculation, however unconsciously these forces may work while the writer makes the story. The occupation of 'writer' is far less controlled. The way into this occupation is the same as the way into a piece of writing – it is an experience, an overlay and clash of teeming ideas, sensations, memories, commitments, intentions and hopes fulfilled and unfulfilled, which may turn events at any moment. There is only so much you can plan. Very few ideas are realised fully formed. As much as in scientific research, their success depends first on the decision to make an attempt and then, at a certain point, on a decision to keep going – and those decisions have to be made afresh with each piece of work. That is the beauty of eclecticism and why we should trust it: if one line of work is not progressing well, then curiosity and alertness to possibility, however haphazard their operation, will nurture another. What is needed is to learn how to become attuned to patterns of meaning, in art as much as in events and ways of living, which is why I believe anyone wishing to be any sort of artist should study the history as well as the practice of arts. Not only does this connect one to the heritage and deep patterns of our world, but it also equips one with techniques and tricks of the trade that have been tried and tested by others. My work to date has bridged both types of activity. The bulk of my writing has been literary history, but my overriding aim has been to find ways of making new contributions to literature, as an editor first, then as a writer wherever possible. Eclectic my experience has indeed been, in life as in work, but then it is the thrill of variety which drives my work and which I celebrate in it. Tonight I am going to describe only one strand of experience, but as I will explain, it is the essential outline, or through-line, as carried by acts of reading and writing.

The importance of those acts was borne in on me here, around the ages of fifteen and sixteen. It was clear then that literature and language were what I loved best, and that writing – both creative and analytical – invited my obsessive involvement. And *self*-involvement. My enjoyment of all things literary had the unfortunate side effect of leading me rather to dominate class and creative writing group discussions, a habit I am sure many of my peers found insufferable. Words and ideas simply seemed to invoke more words and ideas, and my haste to supply them as the writer I supposed myself to be far outstripped my judgement of how or when to use them, or why. Two experiences exerted a force that finally, after long percolation, reined me in. The first, at the age of fifteen, was hearing the simplest of statements, an aside, in a BBC talk by one of the writers whose work periodically obsessed me – and who had replied graciously and patiently to my fan mail – the English playwright Alan Bennett. Reminiscing on his own

formation as a writer, he said (and, as so often, paused to qualify what he said), '…and if I had had any thoughts of being a writer, which is not the same as writing…' This was a cautionary tale: it is the work that matters, not how you wear it.

If Bennett's meaning was immediately clear, possible adaptations in response to it were not. At sixteen, I was still as prone to spasmodic creative outbursts as ever, trying to live up to whatever ideals I convinced myself I should live up to. But then the school entered into partnership with the recently revived literary journal *HEAT,* edited by another Old Sydneian, Ivor Indyk, and there began a series of visits and talks by all kinds of Australian writers. The effect was startling. As you might expect, the talks firmly asserted the legitimacy of the writer's vocation. Helen Garner's talk took place on September the 12th, 2001, the day on which we had woken up to the events of September the 11th as it still was in the USA, but Garner agreed with Ivor Indyk that the talk should go ahead, despite the universal horror, because gatherings such as literary talks stood for everything terrorism opposed. More significantly for this sixteen-year-old, the *HEAT* talks overrode the abstraction of fame and oriented a sense of priority. Not only did the experience of hearing writers read their work in person enlarge the reality of the printed page, but also, simply, they showed that writers had lives. All the writers featured had, in their own ways, experienced the pull and push of feeling something had to be written, and that their vocations lay in the attempt to write it. They were writers only as, when and if they wrote something. It was a lesson conveyed implicitly over and over again by, among others, Louis Nowra, Nicholas Jose, Brian Castro, J. S. Harry and – a particularly strong memory – Antigone Kefala, a poet left (I think) unjustly at the margins but who persevered in her work defiantly, and whose intensely concentrated evocations of migrating vast distances, from one lifeworld to another, I continue to hear in her haunting voice whenever I read them. And most importantly for me, there was David Malouf, to whom I nervously asked the question that had been troubling me ever since Alan Bennett had made me understand it was labour, not merely belief, that made a writer: 'How much do you *plan* what you are going to write?' Malouf's gentle and considered answer was, 'The planning happens in the writing.' So, there were no ideals outside the effort. Whatever had to be said would be what you worked to find out.

I mention these early lessons because without them nothing else would have happened, but it was many years until they combined with certain experiences in adulthood to find, if you like, their critical mass, which occurred finally in the form of this book, *Lebanon Days.* It is not my first book but my third, and I learned much in the writing of the previous two, only a little of which there is time to describe. In any case, even if certain formative experiences add up – piece by piece, word by word, lesson by lesson – to *Lebanon Days,* they could just as easily have led somewhere else or nowhere much. The other two books were written between and around much other work, in editing and in the public service. Outwardly, it is only very recently – this year, at the age of forty – that I have formally and fully taken on the full-time profession of 'writer,' in the sense that 'writer' is the occupation I now enter on tax and customs forms, but I have been writing and working in ways that conventionally represent 'being a writer' for somewhere between fifteen and twenty years. (The uncertain part is where student work settled into something more secure and serious.) I say 'conventionally,' but anyone could become a writer in their own way. I happen to have studied literature and to have lived and worked among writers by choice, but I know, or have read, lifelong public servants, outback tour guides and geologists who have become writers, and their experiences are utterly different from mine. All that is certain is that the experiences that got *Lebanon Days* written were not events or ideas that changed the course of my life, as a story would have it. They *were* the course of my life and had certain important effects in their own moments. Only in one instance did they all come to bear at once, and that instance was the process of writing this book.

That came about because of the most extreme experience of all. I was living in Beirut, accompanying my wife on her posting as Australia's deputy ambassador to Lebanon. Five years ago this Monday, in the early evening of the 4th of August 2020, a warehouse at Beirut's port containing a stockpile of nearly three thousand tons of ammonium nitrate – a volatile compound used normally in fertiliser but also in bombs – exploded in the largest non-nuclear blast in peacetime history, laying waste to the eastern half of Beirut and destroying the apartment in which my wife and I lived, while we were in it. I was in the act of walking through our kitchen doorway towards where my wife was standing, and had I been one pace behind where the blast caught me, I would have been blown away and probably killed, in one annihilating stroke. As it was, I was thrown forwards into the kitchen, the blast embedding shrapnel in the back of my right heel, nearly severing my Achilles' tendon. It was as though a high-speed train had crashed into our home, brought everything down around it and narrowly missed us. It was lucky that the building stayed standing, but like countless others in east Beirut, it was skeletonised, its interiors blown out. Having staunched the bleeding from our injuries, my wife and I grabbed the emergency survival kits we had prepared as per embassy requirements but joked we would never use, and inched six floors down a staircase strewn with glass and wreckage to wait in the ground-floor foyer, while my wife and her colleagues tried to find out what had happened and what to do. Outside, Beirut was in turmoil: hundreds of thousands of people were suddenly homeless, ejected into the streets, tens of thousands of them injured. We sat in that stairwell for hours, expecting to flee outside if the building collapsed or to barricade ourselves inside if the worst proved to be true and a war had started. Certainly outside there were the noises of

war: buildings collapsing, massed anguished voices, the revving engines and beating footfalls of thousands of people fleeing. It became clear only gradually that what had occurred was a gigantic industrial accident, caused by criminal negligence. Late in that longest of nights, we were picked up by embassy friends who had already heroically rescued one another, and taken to a safer place, where everyone, diplomats and family members – magnificently – pitched into a huge consular operation to locate missing Australians and organise emergency aid for the city's victims.

It is obvious to say that the damage of the shock and terror of the Beirut explosion took years to abate, and that we, as foreigners, had a home country's medical systems to aid our recovery; most people in Lebanon had to look after themselves, in rebuilding. It was not at all obvious that it would lead to the writing of a book. I had been reading and learning as much as I could about Lebanon's history, society and arts, and for the previous eighteen months I had been keeping a notebook of events and impressions, which were, to say the least, forceful. By the time of the explosion, Lebanon had already been through economic collapse and a gigantic and hopeful revolution, in the course of which a million people had marched into the centre of Beirut and occupied a square the size of stadium – two blocks from our house. (A large stadium can hold about 100,000 people. Imagine the sound they make and multiply it by ten.) Yet it was the smaller details that seemed to convey the greatest meaning and in which lay the real pleasure and delight of living there.

Lebanon is a small, poor and much-abused country loaded with the historic disadvantages of having been a province of empires, of being wedged in a disadvantageous corner of the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern worlds, and of being kept down by powerful neighbours. Lebanon is also geographically stunning, its art and architecture and streetscapes alluring and haunting, its people generously hospitable to foreigners. When it is not a country of sumptuous and delicately-flavoured meals enjoyed while sitting beneath vine trellises or among olive trees, it is a country of relaxed interiors, most notably the institution of the lovingly decorated *salon* living room with its 'triple arcades' of arched windows. Beirut is also known as a party town, the nightclub capital of the Arab world, famously (if unofficially) liberal in its attitudes to gay and lesbian relationships, and a warren of lively small bars. Equally, politically, when the society is not undergoing full-frontal military assault, it is experiencing serious internal bleeding. In my notebook I recorded the sights, sounds and impressions of being in these places, as well as details of their histories, but above all I listened to the remarks and notions that people put to me.

I was present for a ferment of ideas and passions which, as events were to confirm, represented a genuine upswell of popular objections to Lebanon's system of government and demands for its complete replacement. Designed by the French, who assumed the League of Nations mandate to rule this former Ottoman province after the First World War, Lebanon's constitution apportions institutional power according to religion. The President must be a Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim, the Speaker of Parliament a Shi'a Muslim, and so on down the ranks of government departments. The arrangement is intended to look harmonious, but it only entrenches intercommunal rivalries around fixed power bases, turning the business of government into an unceasing and vicious competition for favour and resources. This breeds mistrust, loathing, contempt and violence. Lebanon became independent after the Second World War but by the mid-1970s the crosscurrents of religious competition and hatred finally became more than the state could carry. Lebanon descended into tragic and cruel civil war, which lasted fifteen years and which also involved an invasion by Israel and military manipulation by Syria. The war formally ended in 1990, with the various militant-political factions deciding there was now less profit in fighting than in rebuilding the state and sharing in its revenues. Unjust and corrupt, a testing ground for competition between outside powers, and subject to another war in 2006 when Israel sought to eliminate the Shi'a militant group Hizballah, Lebanon nonetheless managed to cobble together a kind of peace. No-one could have imagined that the time when my wife and I arrived, in late 2018, was the peak of that peace.

In 2019, economic arrangements unravelled under a titanic burden of debt. In the crash, people's savings became worthless, and the vast majority of Lebanese who had lived under the thumb of corruption and exploitation decided they had had enough. Astonishingly – and this was evident in what people said to me – they discovered that despite their religiously and ethnically segregated ways of living, they did not have to be strangers to each other. The revolution was massive, electric, daunting, uplifting – and it failed. The cabal of sectarian parties that ran the state ejected the Prime Minister as a scapegoat and then cracked down, violently. People tried to revive the demonstrations in early 2020, only for the COVID-19 pandemic to strike, and a lockdown harsher than Melbourne's, enforced by the military, to descend. Having echoed to a million roaring voices, the streets of Beirut fell totally silent for months. And finally, on a hot August evening, someone tried to weld shut a hole in the wall of a port warehouse containing contraband fireworks, cooking oil and nearly three thousand tons of ammonium nitrate – and the explosion struck.

In the five months between that cataclysm and our final departure from Lebanon, the scale of all we had witnessed seemed overpowering. I had refrained from writing about Lebanon while living there, concentrating instead on translations from Italian and on my own poetry. As husband of the deputy ambassador, I could not be seen to be publishing opinions of the country to which she had been posted. ('Can you believe the deputy ambassador's husband said *that?*') But as we prepared to leave, I understood it was untenable to remain silent in the face of all we had seen. Too many had suffered, too much human potential had been wasted, too much

beauty was unknown beyond its own borders. In our final months, even as events ground on and violence and even war threatened to erupt again – the war in Lebanon last year, Beirut felt brewing while we were still there – certain experiences from long ago rose out of my memory, each speaking its own axiom.

'Being a writer is not the same as writing,' said a familiar voice.

'The planning happens in the writing,' said another.

Their meaning was obvious to me, but what to do about it was not. But then came other memories, other axioms.

'Will you go on down that corridor forever?'

'Could you describe this?'

'What are you on about?'

'Isn't it *fascinating?*'

In the closing weeks of our time in Lebanon, each of these questions insisted on my recognition and reflection. What I realised about each of them and the experiences behind them was what made the difference in getting *Lebanon Days* written. I will explain them one at a time.

'Will you go on down that corridor forever?' At the University of Sydney in the 2000s, I studied literature and modern languages: English, French and, rather to my own surprise, Italian. Chosen out of curiosity, it soon completely absorbed me, not only for the obvious reasons of beauty and fun, but especially because right from the beginning the lecturers gave us literature – prose and poetry, ancient and modern. The capacity of Italian to seduce attention lyrically while achieving extremely fine-grained potential conceptually was addictive. By my second year, Italian had become my major, and by my third, I was living it Italy, on exchange in Bologna, studying and taking exams entirely in the language, then returning home for an Honours year, at the end of which I felt things had barely begun. I was fortunate to win a scholarship to stay on for a doctorate. By this stage, having read Dante and many modern poets in the original, poetry was my favourite medium. Any doctorate has to make an original contribution to its subject, and finding that so many modern lyric poets were being arbitrarily written off as unrealistic and aloof, I wanted to find an example of a poet turning the lyric to face the realities of experience head-on.

I found it in the form of Piero Bigongiari, a Tuscan, who spent most of his life in Florence, and who had been present for the city's bloody and destructive liberation at the end of the Second World War. His poems of war and reconstruction were written continuously from 1944 to 1952, each bearing its date of composition, each elaborating the motifs and phrasing of its predecessors. It is a diary of metaphors and symbolic images, charting the mind's path through and out of the trauma of war. One such motif, out of dozens, is a roaring, rumbling sound, associated with gunfire and bombing, which intrudes on the poet's nightmares but which eventually fades away. My research pinpointed the most likely origin of this motif: during the battle which drove the German occupation out of Florence, Bigongiari – a civilian – took refuge in, of all places, the Accademia, the very museum that houses Michelangelo's *David*. *David* and the other statues had been bricked up for protection, but the Accademia's halls were otherwise clear of objects. In his journal, Bigongiari recorded hearing the sounds of blasts, gunfire and collapsing buildings echoing around him in those halls, from which, since they are windowless, he could see nothing. It was only on emerging ten days later that he saw the devastation of Florence – the trauma from which he had to recover.

Bigongiari's story and its unusual place in post-war Italian literature were the subject of my first book, adapted from my doctoral thesis, *A Voice in the Fire*. For all my hopes of joining the world of literary academia, writing for scholarly publication at the expense of creative work, I never got a post-doctoral fellowship or a job. To earn my living, I turned instead to editing, and did find much to love in that line of work – of which, more in a moment – but for a very long time, a melancholy lingered. I had believed in what I was doing, and had suppressed or redirected much creative energy for the sake of a career which seemed to have been denied.

Even so, I read on, and learning of later poets whom Bigongiari inspired, I encountered the work of French poet Yves Bonnefoy, and a prose meditation of his had a profound and haunting – almost terrifying – effect on me. The narrator describes wandering the Vatican Museums, and in the heat and colour of the place and the press of many other people, he slips into the strangeness of a dream. Looking down a seemingly infinitely long corridor, bursting with vivid images, he murmurs, 'What corridor is this?' 'These,' says someone next to him, 'are all the paintings which *could* have been painted.' Even as I speak that phrase now, I shiver – such unrealised potential, so much work not done, so many possibilities not brought to fruition, so many things not shared, lining a corridor that extends into infinity, separate from the world that you and I inhabit.

Picking my way through debris down the staircase in Beirut, hearing the sounds of the city's agony outside, it was Piero Bigongiari I thought of, in the echoing Accademia halls. And later, doubting I could write anything about that moment, I thought of Yves Bonnefoy in that long corridor.

'Will you go on down that corridor forever?' they both seemed to be asking. Will you see all this and do nothing? And thinking back on all the writing I had not done, I was moved to answer, No, not forever.

But how to leave the corridor?

Escaping death by the nearest miss, emerging into a city half destroyed, a country brutalised but – always in contradiction of itself – still able to pick itself up and enjoy life, how could I possibly make something of this overpowering subject?

'Could you describe this?' It was another emblematic form of words that became known to me here at Grammar. It was in an extension class on Russian literature, one of the highlights of Sixth Form, that I first read the poet Anna Akhmatova. Like Bigongiari,

she lived through an era of political torment, though whereas Bigongiari saw fascism fall and Italy return to democracy, Akhmatova lived most of her life under the repression of the Soviet Union: her first husband was executed in the Terror, and her second husband and her son were imprisoned in the Gulag. Still, Akhmatova managed to write and circulated her poems in secret. Friends memorised them. Hers is another tragic story, but I admire her will to persevere. Her great poem *Requiem* opens with a description of standing in queues in the deep cold outside a Leningrad prison, in the vain hope of being allowed to see her son. Another woman recognises her as Akhmatova the poet. 'Could you describe this?' the woman asks. Akhmatova replies, 'I can.' So strong is this faith in testimony which she finds within herself, she concludes *Requiem* with an invocation to the future, calling upon it to erect her statue on the very spot where she stood waiting at the prison gates. To me, not even that is the most affecting part, implying though it does that firstly there will be a future, and secondly that those living in it will have the humanity to understand the injustice the poet has suffered and to commemorate it. No, it is the poem's closing lines that made the greatest impression on me, giving over the statue's days to the texture of the place where it stands: 'Let the prison dove call in the distance / and the boats go quietly on the Neva.' Which is to say, the enormity of political events, of mortality and suffering, does not divorce them from the sights and sounds of everyday events. For Akhmatova, in the distant future of that spot, a dove would still call, boats would still pass quietly, making knowable what seemed beyond envisaging. Where the mind cannot yet go, the senses may yet begin to illustrate. We feel our way if we cannot think it.

'Could you describe this?' Lebanon asked me. And all at once, I realised I could. The notebook I had been keeping contained everything I needed to begin to try: all the details that had made the most serious impressions. Not accounts of the latest politicking among the ruling parties or the tides of empires and war, but the total absence of traffic noise in the lockdown spring; the emptiness of the streets where a million people had marched and where traffic had once droned constantly, the usual noise was replaced by occasional birdsong; the branches of bougainvillea, with no-one to trim them, climbing out over garden walls; the lone man on the roof opposite our apartment who went marching every evening, a long-ago military drill now his only pattern of exercise; the limestone villas lovingly restored and redecorated after the civil war, next door to the burned-out shells of similar buildings left pock-marked with bullet-holes and never lived in again. All these details – of quiet, of apparent repose, but also of deep unease – came back to me in the days after the explosion as I tried to find some comparison for the shocked, broken silence that came over the city after the blast. The abstractions of politics and society find their comparisons, their objective-correlatives, if you like, in the sensations of everyday living. Even the moment the blast-wave came at our windows found its equivalent in something most of us will have experienced: as I lay stunned and reliving events in my head that first day, it occurred to me I had seen the blast-wave out of the corner of my eye, rushing at our windows like a bird crossing the sun.

In recording earlier sensations in that notebook, I had unwittingly already answered the question of what material would make up any account I might give of our time in Lebanon. And the notebook itself, like us, had had a narrow escape. Whereas all my other notes and work records had been blown off the desk and out the window, lost forever, the notebook had landed in the window-box. I fished it out of a pile of glass and metal a few days after the explosion, while salvaging what I could from the apartment. A small hard drive on which I had stored a nearly-complete volume of poetry also escaped destruction, as it had been stored in a drawer; that, too, I fished out, and in time it became my second book, *Beginning in Sight*.

So, I could describe what we had known, insofar as I could hold it in my gaze. But description is the beginning of a meaningful account of things, not the end.

'What are you on about?' This question echoed down to me from a conversation with an artist of my own age whom I have only ever met once or twice, but who, at the time I met him, seemed to have been treading a similar path to mine. His name is Peter Nelson and currently he lives and works in Hong Kong, but when I met him, more than ten years ago – which is to say, about ten years after I left Grammar – we were both still living in Sydney, and he was freelancing on his talent, living from one commission or exhibition or installation to the next, much in the same way I was taking on one piece of editing work after another. The difference between us, professionally, was that I was getting by and he was getting on. Although he could never predict where his next engagement might come from, there was a sense of direction about him which I admired and lacked. My own writing – short, intense lyric poems – came in fits and starts between long silences, while I took what work I could as an editor. That profession taught me essential lessons in itself, not least the need to be silent and to serve the intentions and the impulses that are put before you. But no matter how separate the intentions of others may be from your own, repeatedly enforced silences are not the ideal discipline for generating your own work. I asked Peter Nelson how he managed to keep creating new work despite all the ceaseless stopping and starting of the art world – did he have any advice? He gave the question long thought, and replied, 'You need to know what you're on about. What are you on about?' Which was to say, what is the coherence, the through-line, of all the bits and pieces? When at last you have a moment to write again, what line of thought will you take up?

It was a profound offering and one I never lived up to until some ten years later, in the completion of *Beginning in Sight* and the writing of *Lebanon Days*. It took that long because before I could know what I was on about, I had to know what I was getting at, but my

poems emerged in small and highly concentrated forms, each one separated from the last by a long gap of time and conceptual distance, getting at something different whenever the material settled into place. *Beginning in Sight* rode the long wave to completion while we were in Lebanon, the new poems finding ways to sit alongside and between their forerunners of several years before and aligning with their mood and their style, if not always their subjects. That is another story, but suffice to say that the process at last cleared the air for other things, the first of which was *Lebanon Days*. And the air being cleared, the dust having settled, the injuries having healed, there could be no doubt, broadly, what I would be on about – Lebanon was a ready subject. In asking myself what I was on about, I was really asking: was my subject Lebanon, or myself in Lebanon?

Before it is anything else, *Lebanon Days* is a reckoning with the ethical problems of speaking about the intimacies of a culture to which one has no familial claim whatsoever and which one grows to know as a privileged outsider. Whatever I was on about, it must absolutely avoid impersonating or ventriloquising a Lebanese point of view. That would have been presumptuous to the point of being intrusive, even violent. Lebanon has a rich literature and a passionate political commentariat of its own, which were already yielding serious insights into what had taken place, and I had no intention of telling the Lebanese their business. Yet I was mindful that although voices and stories of Lebanon are often heard in the Arabic world and are somewhat known in the Francophone world, they rarely or incompletely filter through to the Anglophone world. We most often hear of Lebanon on the news as a place torn with strife and war. Whatever I was on about, I resolved, I must offer a larger picture, reflecting the richness of the Lebanese setting and the variety of histories and life experiences contained there. It must report the points of view that were put to me and that were suggested to me by events, places and materials. At the same time, certain things had happened to me personally which I believed were of value to the common picture, but which could never become part of that picture unless I spoke about them, which inevitably meant involving myself in the picture.

So, the question of what I was on about was also a question of form: was it a set of socio-political essays I was going to write, or a travelogue, or a memoir? The answer came, as David Malouf said it would, in the writing. I began in the same way I write poems, creating small pieces, scenes, describing events or settings, and then, bringing to bear the rational analytical side of my mind, drawing out the political or historical or societal conclusions they implied. And the more scenes of this kind that emerged, the clearer it became that the book would not be only a piece of socio-political commentary, or a travelogue, or a memoir, but an amalgam of all three, with all of those instincts and forms working together. What was I on about? It was the fact that what had happened to me had happened to millions. It was the details that could make the political personal, the remote intimate, the overpowering contained.

And so the last of those echoing, insistent questions made its offer: 'Isn't it fascinating?' To which my instinctive answer, which came to mind with the force of a revolt, was, No – it is not fascinating. It is real. It is known. It is felt, passionately, painfully.

My answer was ready because this question was one I had been burning to answer for a decade, far too late for the moment I had heard it posed. That had been at a conference at the University of Sydney in 2009. World news that week was seized with the massive uprising in Iran against rigged elections that had returned an autocrat to the presidency. The power grab provoked demonstrations on a scale not seen in thirty years, as hundreds of thousands of Iranians took to the streets demanding free and fair democracy. This outpouring of generations of repressed desire, known to us all as the 'Tehran Spring,' electrified the Iranian diaspora as well as the masses marching in the capital. Then the Iranian government turned on the demonstrators and put down their peaceful movement with violence. The Revolutionary Guards rode into the crowds on motorbikes. Iranians in exile could only watch in horror and heartbreak. I know because I saw the emotional turn and its turmoil myself, for two Iranian postgraduates, a married couple, were present at the Sydney conference. On finding out who they were and where they were from, professors of literature, modern languages and philosophy gathered round the pair in a tea break to say how remarkable it all must have been. 'Isn't it fascinating?' By the time I spoke with this couple – once the professors had wandered off – they were visibly affronted and distressed, but maintained their composure with a dignity the like of which I had never witnessed before and seldom have seen since. There was nothing fascinating for them about what was happening in Tehran. It was their home that was convulsing. It was people like them, who studied and had sophisticated ideas for the future of their country, who were going under the wheels of the motorbikes. 'This madness,' they could only say, 'This madness.'

I said I was sorry. We did not speak of such things for long. In admitting and sharing sorrow and then turning to other subjects, things we loved, things we did find fascinating, we became friends. In writing what became *Lebanon Days,* I felt I owed it to them to say to people in my own world what I had been unable to say in 2009. No, this is not fascinating. This is not subject matter. This is life and it can be as brutal as it can be beautiful.

In writing *Lebanon Days,* I did revisit the histories and the analyses of Lebanon's society and politics and economy that I had read on first moving there, but I did not merely transpose and cite interpretations such as historian Fawwaz Traboulsi's startling insight that, on the basis of distribution of wealth and political buying power, today's Lebanon is not a post-conflict society recovering from civil war but a *pre-conflict* society in

which conditions are precisely those that brought about the civil war in the first place. That analysis opened my eyes to certain realities in the new country I was living in, but it did not do the living for me, any more than it did for the Lebanese people who said something about their lives and in so doing revealed something about themselves. A vintner among his vines, in the foothills of the northern ranges: 'I think when people try and kill each other, isn't there anything better for you to do? But no, it looks like not. You try to take over the world so that you have a world to take.' The satirical wit of demonstrators in the revolution of 2019, as immortalised on their placards: *Break out of your cages and eat your zookeepers! Save Lebanon – it's the only country with real hummus!* My doctor, checking up on me in the days after the explosion: 'I think every foreigner who lived through that blast should be made an honorary citizen of Lebanon. You might not feel honoured. But you are a citizen.' A taxi driver, looking out at the devastated port as we pass it on the freeway, suspecting that no-one will ever be brought to justice for the blast: 'All the world knows what happened here. The only one who doesn't know is Lebanon.' The same taxi driver, who happened to pick me up again another day: 'There are people in Israel and Palestine who just want to work. The Lebanese just want to work. We have nothing to argue about.' A mountain guide: 'Lebanon: so rich, so small. Think of people forced to emigrate. All they must leave. To gain one thing, they lose ten things.' The point of the book was to make these and many other voices heard, beyond a small conversation with me or the noticing of details in passing.

'Isn't it fascinating?' No. Or, not only. Before anything, these matters are human, to be heard and weighed before we dissect them with self-regarding mental attitudes.

The effort required to restrain the analytical instinct from interfering with the creative impulse, and vice versa, can be very large. They have their different aims and functions; they have their places. There is, however, a received notion that academia is the preserve of analysts and that artists belong in the wild, except for when they are occasionally brought into the laboratory for study and theoretical experiments. 'Universities don't want poets,' someone at the University of Sydney once told me to my face. I say that is wrong. We are all of us capable of being more than one thing, in the one place. That place is my Ithaka, and what I have been describing is the process of being pushed and driven on to find it.

I have been speaking mainly about one book and some of the matters it addresses, but my larger concern has been to show you that despite the obstacles and discouragements that artists find placed in their way, it is not only possible but fulfilling to live and work as one. I have been honest about the difficulties that may be involved in realising what kind of artist you are and what kind of work you might do, but then there are no typical cases. If, for me, writing nearly ended before it even began, then that was because I was late to realise that writing could serve experience as much as reproducing or exploring it. In closing, I want to say to anyone listening – especially those nearing the end of schooling – who might wish to be any sort of artist: do not leave the understanding of such service as late as I have. Beyond all that you read for pleasure and learn from history and the techniques of others – which in all seriousness any writer should do – if you can scrutinise your own intentions, assess your position in relation to your subject and understand and accept your obligations to that subject, then you will be ready to do your work. The questions of the audience, publication, dissemination and all the rest of it will be important, but later. Know yourself first. Know what it is you are driven to do and why you must do it. Then you will get it done.

I began by explaining why I do not consider this lecture to be a story. One other reason for this attitude is that stories end. The only reason why I am now a writer, having been many other things, is that the end has not come yet. I am at work on research for a very large book, a new authorised biography of the Australian poet Les Murray, while writing other things in its orbit. (That includes fiction, which I have taken up again after more than twenty years.) So, this has not been a story. The meaning of what I have been telling you is incomplete and anything could happen next, but the experience that began here – this event, for our purposes – stops here for now.