we are whirling
through Beirut
the city i visit most
often in my sleep
i take this to mean
i am making
my best effort
to dream in Arabic
where the air is rich
in orange
flowers & rhyme
& we draw
back our lips
to speak

in the so-called city
that never sleeps
i tightrope along
the edge of cobble-
stones bathed in light
& last week’s trash

i dream by nose
the heavy stench
of garbage rotting
into the sweet
fresh ka’ak
golden purses
who ride the air
like wooden boats

in my ear a moped
twists & guzzles
the pitted road
spitting gravel under
the too-slow heel
of somebody’s foot
somebody’s foot grazes
mine & i find a boy there
gazing at me through
the small eyehole of my sleep
i have forgotten his name
until my mother reminds me
it’s Hani  there in a teal t-shirt
black irises flowering from his eyes

* 

one summer afternoon
with Hani  we swam & played
licking ice pops  sticky lipped
on the stone apartment steps
our knees slapping open
to greet the turquoise sea
we floated weightless
our bodies fanning starfish

* 

later that day i received my first
lecture on the dangers of touch
& electricity in Beirut
though i had been warned i still
swung open the refrigerator door
a sudden shock of light jolting
my arm from inside  a blade
zigzagging hot through my bones

JANAN ALEXANDRA
when asked about his time
in Beirut    Mahmoud Darwish said

Poetry requires a stable temperature, around twenty degrees Celsius! Ice and very hot weather kill poetry, and Beirut was boiling, Boiling with feelings and visions. Beirut was a land of perplexity.

•

dear land of perplexity
i think i understand
what the Poet means

everyone always clicks
their teeth soberly & says
the situation is very bad

& in the same breath
a phoenix appears
in love with living

who    for the sake
of a new beginning
will burn itself alive
dear secret stairways
painted brightly  singsong
greetings i know & do not know
dear orange juice held
in squat paper pouches
sleeves of Nescafé
dear mushroom shop
candy stall  your lengths
& ribbons of sweets
unrolling like the tongue’s
lottery tickets  dotted
with pink & blue treats
i sling my arm around
your balconies at night
catch myself falling
through the house
with windows blown
out  face agape
as the story goes
we once lived
in a beige house

two parents
two sisters
one black cat

two turtles
who left
& never
came back.

Notes

Mahmoud Darwish’s quote is from *Palestine as metaphor*, translated by Amira El-Zein and Carolyn Forché (Northampton: Interlink Books, 2019).

The lines “a phoenix appears /...will burn itself alive” refer to and borrow from “Resurrection and Ashes” by Adonis (trans. Al- ba’ th wal-Ramâd).