

IMAGINED POSSIBILITIES

Elaine Equi

HERE THERE WAS ONCE A COUNTRY

Vénus Khoury-Ghata

Translated by Marilyn Hacker

Oberlin College Press
10 North Professor Street, Oberlin, OH 44074
116 pages; paper, \$14.95

A LONG-GONE SUN

Claire Malroux

Translated by Marilyn Hacker

The Sheep Meadow Press
PO Box 1345, Riverdale-on-Hudson, NY 10471
202 pages; paper, \$15.95

One reason that I like to read poetry in translation is because I feel that poets from different national cultures aren't stuck in the same arguments that US poets are. They may be stuck in their own debates, which may in fact be similar to ours, but even a slight degree of difference in perspective is often enough to enable us to see things in a whole new way. For those who've found the standoff between experimental and experiential poetics unproductive, these two new books by distinguished French poets, wonderfully translated by Marilyn Hacker, offer fresh possibilities.

In Vénus Khoury-Ghata's work, I rediscovered my love of surrealism in a modern context. That is to say, she's able to call upon the tradition and techniques of surrealism, its imagery, its vocabulary, in a way that makes it relevant and new. Khoury-Ghata, who is both a poet and novelist, was born in Lebanon and has lived in France since 1972. For many years, she says that she wrote all the drafts of her poems in both Arabic and French—and certainly her work reflects a recombining of those two poetic

heritages. It is, on the one hand, fantastic and wildly imaginative, and on the other, grounded in a harsh, elemental reality.

Here There Was Once a Country consists of four extended poems. The first, called "Widow," begins:

The first day after his death
she folded up her mirrors
put a slipcover on the spider web
then tied up the bed which was flapping its
wings to take off.

The second day after his death
she filled up her pockets with wood chips
threw salt over the shoulder of her house
and went off with a tree under each arm.

This poem, which covers the first ten days after death, is like a reversal of the beginning of Genesis—only here, death is the igniting, creative spark and the widow the active agent who must remake the world. It is a poem where the intensity of grief leads also to a kind of ecstasy, not in the sense of happiness, but as a force that takes one out of one's self.

The figure of the widow can be read as Khoury-Ghata herself, since sadly, her own second husband died. But the widow is also a compelling symbol of national mourning in a country as marked by loss as Lebanon.

On a larger level, she is a dark, archetypal shadow that haunts us all. In the poem, this persona is remarkably powerful and her amazing feats are celebrated in the same way tall tales are told about folk heroes.

A longer sequence called "The Dead Man's Monologue" continues this exploration of after-death states. To Khoury-Ghata, ghosts are palpable things that not only share our life, but often threaten to overwhelm it—"They [the dead] harness our nights/ saddle our dreams/ mount us from the heart's forgetful side." There is something not just startling, but often violent

in Khoury-Ghata's images. One thinks of Paul Celan, another émigré to France, who coupled surrealism with the horrors of history.

Yet even when her subject is grim, Khoury-Ghata is able to come across as irreverent, irrepressible, playful, and humorous. This lighter side emerges much more in the second half of the book and is particularly in evidence in a delightful, gossipy take-off on village life and customs called "The Seven Honeysuckle Sprigs of Wisdom."

The poem recalls a place best described by exaggeration ("In my village the sheep are so tall they graze on the bellies of/ clouds...") and partakes of the giddy pleasure of revealing everyone's best kept secrets:

Rahil who was a communist
well before
 Lenin and Siberia won't
judge anyone
since her son slept with her
she-goat and
 then bought her three
necklaces and a gold
nose-ring.

Or take Maroun, who "has quit his job in the brickyard to set up shop as a liar."

Although the individual poems in this book are separate, they comfortably fit together to create a "surreal autobiography"—a wonderful genre I only wish more authors would explore. In an age as secular and devoid of magic as our own, Vénus Khoury-Ghata has restored the dimension of myth.

Claire Malroux's book-length poem, *A Long-Gone Sun*, is a more overtly true-to-life autobiographical narrative than Khoury-Ghata's. However, her use of this mode is just as complex and surprising, but for different reasons. In place of myth, Malroux uses the lens of history to create a larger framework in which to view the individual. But her work does not simply include history as a backdrop or stage setting for personal events. Rather, she has written a poem about the relationship between memory and history, the

private and the public, being and becoming. It is a story that focuses on her own family, in particular her father, a socialist and teacher, who later was elected to office, joined the Résistance, and was in the end arrested and sent to Bergen-Belsen (where he died).

Malroux is a master at capturing the texture of everyday life and the way history resides in its particulars—the feeling of warm stone "alive under our thighs" or the smell of a certain disinfectant used at school or the cut of a favorite dress "with a plunging V-neck/ extremely saucy/ for an old-fashioned adolescent." It is interesting to think that Malroux is herself a translator of, among other American poets, Elizabeth Bishop. I feel in Malroux a similar love of precise, physical description. But Malroux is not simply a realist. She is also a philosopher—I want to say, a phenomenologist, interested in exploring the very nature of how and why things are as they are in "a world endlessly taking form."

Early in the book we come upon this highly concentrated lyrical moment of self-awareness:

The universe overflows with universes...
but she can't take a step without
destroying the warp and woof
where her being is woven
Stopped short at the confluence of images
she is born to herself at that moment
having found her own shores.

It is a moment of both excitement and discovery, but already it contains the inescapable idea that we both make history and we are made by it. *A Long-Gone Sun* traces what happens to the intimate space of family and the familiar, when "outside" is the pressure of an oncoming war. One especially poignant example of this collision between worlds comes as Malroux is listening to her father deliver a political speech:

My father speaks from the podium and what
disturbs me
is that he's no longer altogether my father



*Detail from cover of Here
There Was Once a Country*

*It's as if Malroux is asking where,
if ever, do the mundane and
the epic intersect.*

...

I'm still reluctant, when I hear this foreign
voice
distorted by loudspeakers
to share him with all these strangers
these faceless ideas....

The poem ends at a memorial service after her father's death. Looking at a bust of him that's been erected adjacent to another statue of a local hero (who was a world explorer), Malroux muses that "[i]f the two men's lines of vision cross/ it's at some point invisible to us." It's as if she is asking where, if ever, do the mundane and the epic intersect. What makes this poem so fascinating is its continual unveiling of the places in which they do.

As different as Malroux's and Khoury-Ghata's voices are, they both expand our definition of "the personal" in poetry. They also prove that French poetry is a good deal more varied than the cerebral, post-Mallarmé style we often associate with it. If, recently, Americans have looked to French poetry for its questioning of the whole notion of the self, perhaps now, thanks in part to Hacker's effort, they can also turn to it for ideas on how to see subjectivity in a more complex and subtle light.

Elaine Equi is the author of many books, including Surface Tension, Decoy, and, most recently, Voice-Over, which won the San Francisco State Poetry Award.