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## Obituary for a City

Lina Abirafeh

How does one write an obituary for a city? A good obituary must capture and honor the spirit of the deceased, guidelines say.

Start with the key facts, it says, then add in meaningful life moments and memorable stories—the stuff that makes the deceased live on in our minds. Finally, ask: How would the deceased want to be remembered?

Every guide to writing an obituary explains that it starts with a name, an announcement of who has passed, and how they were known.

*What is the name of the deceased?*

Beirut.

Or, Bayrut. Beyrouth.

And before that, *Be'erot*, as the Canaanites called her.

And *Berut*, the wells, as the Phoenicians called her, referring to the ancient city's underground water supply.

And in 64 BCE, under Agrippa's rule, the city was renamed after the emperor's daughter: *Colonia Julia Augusta Felix Berytus*.

Beirut is—and has always been—a woman.

*What was the age at death?*

How old is Beirut? Do we even know?

She is as old as the stones and the sea, with a history of conquests, crises, chaos. And charm.

The city's story began more than 5,000 years ago, first mentioned in the ancient Egyptian *Tell el Amarna* letters in the 15<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

Our little city has been continuously inhabited ever since, with evidence of Phoenician, Hellenistic, Roman, Arab, and Ottoman civilizations. The city is a magical mille-feuille, with layer upon layer of civilization built and destroyed.

And then the civil war. After the long and destructive war, Beirut rebuilt itself, and the redesigned city center, marina, pubs, and nightlife districts have made it once again a popular tourist destination.

*Where did the deceased spend their last days?*

Beirut sits as the midpoint of a spectacular stretch of coastline caressing the Mediterranean Sea. The city is shaped like a triangle between two hills. The water, the mountains—one might think she won the geographic lottery. If only we had taken better care of her.

Beirut, we often forget, belongs to a country. To Lebanon. And what is Lebanon? An arbitrary landmass with borders drawn by occupiers. An eclectic collection of allegiances. A sectarian salad too chaotic to consume. A tiny landmass with enormous personalities. A landmass of 6.7 million people, two million of whom live crammed together inside of Beirut's borders.

*Who is the deceased? What did she achieve over the course of her lifetime?*

Beirut was once the center of Arab intellectual activity. That was in the 19th century. Our archaic politics and outdated religious convictions have caused our intellect to atrophy. We did it to ourselves.

Beirut was officially born as Lebanon's capital in 1943, with the country's independence. At that time, our dearly departed city was a major center of commerce, creation, and tourism.

It is no longer so.

Beirut was once the banking capital of the Arab region. Ironic, considering where she is today. The so-called "Switzerland of the Middle East" was home to many financial institutions, presumably functional. She is also the "Paris of the Middle East"—we all know her by that name. We flaunt that name shamelessly as we glorify the past, and as we allow the present to crumble at our feet.

Before the 2006 war, Beirut was ranked the ninth-best city in the world, according to Travel and Leisure Magazine. *Before* the war.

Before the 2020 explosion, she was a center of public protest, led by a young generation intent on change.

*Cause of death?*

Murder, we could argue. We do argue. By the government, by an outdated sectarian system built on corruption and discrimination.

She has died and been rebuilt seven times. *Seven*. One might argue that she could do so again.

Rebuild. Reincarnate, like some of her Druze population.

Or perhaps her legendary “resilience” has finally expired.

She had many could-have-been moments, times when she was stable and prosperous and almost there. But not quite.

But, let us not romanticize the past. The country has always been unequal. Layers of civilization masked layers of discrimination and disaster—economic, political, civil, religious, environmental. And gendered. Women are underrepresented in every aspect of public, political, and productive life. Women in Beirut believe themselves to be liberated, but biases and inequalities run deep.

Lebanon is a country that masquerades as advanced. Progressive. But it has never been so. The violence of our past continues to determine the ways that the country is ruled. We are forced to live in a state of demographic denial to “prevent” a recurrence of our unfortunate legacy of violence. To “prevent” the seemingly inevitable “next” civil war. We don’t want to know who we are.

*They don’t want us to know who we are.* Instead, they consign us to live in a city, in a country, that will kill us. They have pushed us into a state of desperation that the country has never experienced before the pandemic, the blast, the political crisis, the economic collapse. Beirut’s murder is the culmination of this desperation.

*By whom is the deacease survived?*

Beirut is survived by her population, a desperate, dwindling population fighting for its own survival.

Nearly 75% are below the poverty line. No medication, no fuel, no food.

Anyone who can leave has left. A one-way ticket.

Every day we say we have reached the bottom. The next day, we descend further.

*Where is the service? Is there a memorial? A vigil? A grave?*

There seem to have been many. But we can prevent more from happening.

Do we want to write an obituary for Beirut? For Lebanon?! Of course, we do not.

So, then what?

It is time for serious change. For a meaningful, substantial, concrete, courageous, radical change.

The Beirut of today must die if we expect to birth something that might be able to live. A Beirut in which we *all* might live.

A critical prerequisite to the city's—and the country's—survival is a secular state. Sectarian politics has killed us all already. Our system of governance is not a system at all, but rather a case study in cronyism and corruption.

I would also argue that Beirut's survival depends on women—*all* women. Male leadership has killed the country. Now is the time for a change. Gender equality and women's rights will pave the way for a politically and religiously independent governance structure and civil society. The rebirth of our dead city must make room for all of us as equals. Identities and labels have only divided us.

We need reforms—both political and economic. Not just reforms, but a total overhaul. A redo. Nothing of the old systems must remain. Only if we courageously dismantle the entire structure can we build something solid in its place. No new house can survive on feeble foundations.

We need to invest in each other, in our health, education, and economy. When societies are healthy and educated, everyone is better off. Lebanon knows this. Beirut represented this. Decades have proven this. What is stopping us?

The state. It has always stopped us. And yet, to whom is it accountable? To us. To its citizens. To its residents. To those who try to survive as Beirut dies.

We need to build a viable state with clear roles and responsibilities. There are rights-bearers and there are duty-holders. We—the population—bear the rights. The state has the duty.

In this new state, there is no room for patriarchy. There is no room for religion. There is no room to dismiss feminism and equality. These are non-negotiables. Our survival depends on them.

I write an obituary for a nearly dead city.

I hope I never have to write a real one.