

## Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

### Tea In Heliopolis

By Hedy Habra

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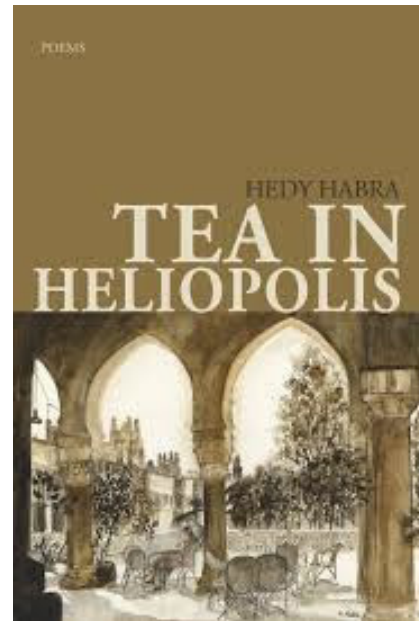
*review by Myles Gordon*

**H**ELIOPOLIS once stood as one of the grand cities of the ancient world. Located in what is now Cairo, Egypt, Heliopolis was a center of culture, commerce, and learning, attracting Homer, Pythagoras, Plato and other to its schools of philosophy and astronomy. Today, the city remains barely visible – a few relics in a northeast suburb of Cairo. Most of Heliopolis lies buried beneath the neighborhoods of Egypt's capital, the Al-Masalia obelisk, from the Temple of Re-Atum, the largest of its few, visible surviving monuments. After reading Hedy Habra's *Tea In Heliopolis*, one understands why this city, largely destroyed and forgotten, is the namesake for her powerful book.

There can be a solemn perspective gained by those who lose their homes and possessions to natural disasters. While all the things are lost, the people survive and have each other. Things are merely transitory items that can be replaced. But the family and loved ones, and the love shared: these transcend the flood, hurricane or tornado. But for those who have lost their homes and way of life through man's malice toward man, there is a poignantly, tragic edge to this perspective: things did not have to turn out this way. People did not have to act like this. Habra's family lost their idyllic home and all they worked for and achieved during Lebanon's protracted civil war fought from 1975 to 1990. Like a million other Lebanese citizens, Habra and her family fled the country. She ended up in Michigan, where she now teaches Spanish and literature at Western Michigan University. She has already published a short story collection, *Flying Carpets*, and is an accomplished painter (she painted the lovely motif for this book's cover). She has achieved great success in her chosen profession, but her poetry is haunted by a once tranquil life lost in war-torn Lebanon, in remnants that emerge like the ruins of Heliopolis, the once-grand ancient city.

The desire to recapture what was lost emerges again and again, as in "To My Son Upon His First Visit to Lebanon" when the protagonist visits the tenants in the summer home lovingly built then tragically abandoned by his grandfather:

*He called us excited, said he wanted to buy  
the house back.  
We could spend summers there.  
Time regained, he thought...*



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*eager to relive our dream,  
retrieve its lost broken pieces  
but the poet's perspective is revealed in a hard-gained lesson to her son:  
I tried to explain what does belonging mean exactly?  
And does it really matter?  
This restrained, stoic outlook centers "Lost and Found" where the poet and  
her mother visit a hall filled with lost items from the recent Diaspora, to see if  
they  
can find any of their sentimental family treasures:  
I'm afraid to go to someone's home in Lebanon  
and see my life scattered all over,  
fetishes sold at black markets  
As if I owned a palace  
As if it mattered  
As if anything mattered  
since our children left  
untouched, unharmed*

What matters in the highest sense are one another and the bonds and love that still remain. All well and good, but sometimes the gloves come off. Habra's usually elegant, measured voice can explode in searing, though justifiable, rant. From "Raoucheh":

*...we cannot silence  
...the song of the windshields constellated with stars of death  
the song of the driver forced to leave his car at an intersection  
the song of an entire school bus emasculated because they were Maronites  
the song of mothers and children blown up because they were not Maronites  
the song of a town torn apart, its children hanging like heavy fruits from  
olive  
and almond-trees, nipples and testicles dripping with blood on the  
lower branches...*

Like Heliopolis, Raoucheh was a thriving urban center, a cultural and social neighborhood of Beirut that has become a symbol of violence and loss for Habra, through the displacement and the brutality of Lebanon's civil war. Powerful stuff, and her power covers the local and personal as well as the global. Most of Habra's work evoke family: the father she adores who can turn on her in a heartbeat, most likely because of the national turmoil at hand. In "A Seaside Café, My First Taste of Fresh Oysters," the poet's father teaches her the intricate method of eating the delectable creatures, first slathering them in lemon juice. Then, inexplicably, he bursts into anger:

*Yet one day you chased me  
around the house, menacing,  
a slipper in your raised hand.  
No one recalls what I had done.  
There is the elegant mother who taught life lessons on being an artist and a  
woman, from "To Henriette":  
"There's no such thing as true love," you'd*

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*say, "the greatest passion melts like ice."  
How I wanted you to be wrong. Your canvases'  
message reaches me, muffled by time and  
distance...*

*And, in some of the book's most powerful sequences, there is the poet's  
grandmother, also elegant and cosmopolitan, who suffered a freak accident  
that left her in a wheelchair. From "The White Brass Bed":*

*You live with us, Nonna.*

*You are always sitting,  
you push the wheels  
forward, backward,  
one motion, both hands,  
your only exercise.*

*You brought your bed along.*

*It is too high for you, now.*

*You sleep on your couch in a corner.*

*The white, brass bed stands  
In the middle, empty, useless.*

Like Heliopolis, the poet's grandmother retains for the poet the greatness now unseen by the rest of the world. Habra, the painter and scholar sees it as only an artist can. Many of her poems are about her process of painting and sketching, and the subtle nuance of brushstroke fills her work. In "Waiting in a Field of Melted Honey" she actually places herself in a painting by one of her inspirations, Vincent Van Gogh.

I am waiting in a field of melted honey, hiding behind a blue tree  
that is not really a tree, a root Vincent chose to paint as a tree...

As in Van Gogh's paintings, the canvases of Habra's poems come to life, bringing back worlds that aren't there anymore, for the reader to embrace.

### Reviewer Biography

Myles Gordon's book-length book of poetry, *Inside the Splintered Wood*, was recently published by Tebot Bach (Huntington Beach, CA), as winner of the press's "Patricia Bibby First Book Competition." His chapbook, *Recite Every Day*, was published by Evening Street Press (Dublin, Ohio) in 2009, as winner of the press's "Helen Kay Chapbook Competition." He is a past winner of the Grolier Poetry Prize, and honorable mention for an AWP Intro Award – Poetry. He has published poetry in numerous journals including *Slipstream* and *Rattle*. He holds a Master of Fine Arts from Vermont College of Fine Arts, and a Master of Education from the University of Massachusetts, in Amherst. He teaches school in Revere, Massachusetts and has previously worked as a television producer for WCVB TV, where he won four New England Emmy Awards for his writing and producing efforts.