

CULTURE

Where Do I Go? (لوين روح؟): Rania Matar's Women of Lebanon

Rania Matar's new photography book follows young Lebanese women as they navigate a landscape marked by war, memory, and the question of whether to leave or stay

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Farah (in Her Burnt Car), Abey, Lebanon, 2020

Rania Matar was a child when she first observed war through a frame. Growing up in Beirut during the civil war, she looked out her window at the Holiday Inn, which opened in 1974 in a flush of modernist optimism, and watched it change. Through binoculars, she saw curtains catch fire and smoke fold into the surrounding sky. "I watched it go room by room," she says. She recalls this memory in architectural terms: unraveling, frame by frame. Nearly half a century later, the Holiday Inn remains as a 28-storey concrete skeleton looking over the sea.



Petra, Holiday Inn Hotel Pool (the hotel was destroyed in 1976 shortly after it was built), Beirut, Lebanon, 2021

This early act of witnessing shaped the way Matar would later make photographs. She learned to see from a threshold, close enough to feel what was happening, yet distant enough to observe it clearly. She studied architecture at the American University of Beirut and later at Cornell University. When she left Lebanon at twenty to study in the United States, the move was meant to be temporary. Instead, she married, raised four children, and built a life in America. Yet departure from her home never felt final.

Matar's practice began through photographing her children, first as a way of holding onto fleeting moments, then with growing intention. She enrolled in workshops and studied everything about photography. Her use of the camera shifted from documentation to inquiry. "The work is formal," she says now, referring to her photographs. "I like my lines to be parallel to the frame. The environment is important to me." Architecture sharpened her sense of structure, while photography allowed her to place memory within it.



Perla, Where Do I Go, Kfarmatta, Lebanon, 2021

Born in Lebanon to Palestinian parents, Matar grew up alongside overlapping histories of displacement. Her father had arrived in Lebanon as a child from Palestine. She lost her mother at a young age, and for years it was just her and her father navigating a country that was a home as well as a site of fracture. "My role model and my hero in life was a man," she says. That her work centers on women is less ironic than cyclical. She is a daughter raised by a father who had already lost one homeland, now documenting women confronting the possibility of losing another.

During the civil war, she and her father left when the bombing intensified and returned when it subsided. Leaving and returning became rhythmic. For her father, each departure carried the weight of a second exile. For Matar, the pattern subtly embedded itself, building her understanding that home could be permanent *and* provisional.

After 9/11, Matar became aware of how the Middle East was being framed in Western media. "There was always this them versus us rhetoric [...] and I remember thinking, 'I am 'them' and 'us,' so what does that make me?'" The question made her feel responsible for telling a more nuanced story, to complicate the single lens through which the region was being viewed. She began work on her recently published book *Where Do I Go?* (لوين روح؟) in 2020, in the aftermath of the Beirut port explosion. But the project did not emerge from this alone. 2025 marks fifty years since the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War. As Matar writes in her opening essay, Lebanon continues to live in the long shadow of economic collapse, the pandemic, political paralysis, renewed war in 2024, and ongoing violence in 2026.



Mariam (Over the Border Wall), Kfarkila, Lebanon, 2022

Matar initially intended to photograph the aftermath of the explosion, but instead found herself drawn to the young women who were clearing debris, repairing homes, and moving through damaged neighbourhoods with a kind of composure she describes as majestic. In those women, she saw a resilience & self-recognition of the twenty-year-old who left Lebanon in 1984, unsure whether she would return.

Matar began making portraits with these women, choosing locations that carried personal and symbolic weight, either individually or as part of the collective memory. There are textured Beirut walls, raw mountains, the Mediterranean, and abandoned buildings layered with years of accumulated destruction. “Every picture has a narrative,” she writes. Women, land, and architecture all intertwine.

Matar is wary of images that reinforce a familiar narrative of the oppressed Middle Eastern woman, and her work resists that framing deliberately. After photographing heavily bombed areas in southern Lebanon following a 2024 ceasefire, she chose not to include certain images in the book. While the photographs are important, she wanted to get beyond images of destruction. She did not want devastation to dictate the emotional register of this work. Centring the women’s composure, agency, and insistence on presence required restraint. She calls her photographs love letters to the women of Lebanon, written for those who stayed and for those who left but can never fully leave.



Samira, (Third Generation Palestinian Refugee), Jnah, Beirut, Lebanon, 2021

Nour Salame, Matar's publisher at Kaph Books, describes the timing of *Where Do I Go?* as uncannily resonant. "Lebanon is a country constantly in turmoil," she says. "After years of political and economic crises, the most pressing crisis remains one of identity. Rania's book addresses questions of identity and displacement that many Lebanese feel, wherever they are. It is transgenerational."

"There was never a perfect moment to publish this book," Salame adds. "It could have appeared at any time. Yet it happens to arrive between two wars – 2024 and 2026 – when the questions *Where is home? Where can we go? Will we ever feel at home again?* feel more vivid than ever."

The question of leaving and staying is the book's axis. On a crumbling wall, Matar noticed graffiti scrawled in Arabic: روح وين؟ *Where do I go?* She was standing beside a young woman named Perla when she saw it; in a spontaneous gesture, Perla pressed herself against the wall, embodying the question. The phrase became the title of the series.

Given space to express themselves, the women become active participants in the image-making process, climbing rocks and trees, jumping fully dressed into water, crawling under thorns. "Like living in Lebanon, we embrace an element of risk-taking and danger," she writes. The collaboration is intense, creative, emotional, and personal. The photographs are not solutions, Matar acknowledges; nor do they offer closure. Instead, they invite viewers to take pause and find beauty and shared humanity in a landscape that has known repeated rupture.



Petra with Miss Lebanon 1972, (Both Twenty years old, Fifty Years Apart) Gemmayze, Beirut, Lebanon, 2022 (wall art by Brady Black)

In one image, a young woman named Petra leans in front of a mural of Marcelle Herro, Miss Lebanon 1972. Both women are twenty years old. Herro belongs to a pre-war era remembered for glamour and cosmopolitanism, while Petra inhabits a Lebanon molded by collapse and exhaustion. The composition is architectural: Petra's body leaning against the gilded frame that contains Herro's likeness. Two twenty-year-olds, separated by half a century, bound by national memory. "It felt like two bookends of the same story," Matar says.

Across *Where Do I Go?*, the land is its own character. The Mediterranean recurs, often as a horizon line behind a woman's gaze, or as an expanse she stands before. The sea has long marked departure and return in Lebanon: a border & a promise. In Matar's images, it appears luminous, serene, yet a calm that carries weight.



Dahlia (in the Bomb Crater), Aishiyeh, Lebanon, 2025

One photograph depicts Dahlia standing inside a bomb crater, her body upright, deliberate and composed, within the curve of the earth. The crater carries the memory of impact, a terrain permanently changed. The image makes visible how land and identity are bound, how the earth can hold history as intimately as in one's memory. In the book, Matar includes a line from Etel Adnan's *Of Cities and Women*: women have "kept contact with the earth... in the ancient roles of witnesses and memory keepers." The image speaks back to this text. Dahlia stands, taking on the role of witness within the cracked earth. The ground and the body share the work of remembering.

In another image, a woman named Farah sits inside the charred shell of a car, which had been burned during protests against government corruption. The metal is warped, and the windows are gone. On the day of the shoot, Matar stopped to buy flowers. In the photograph, petals spill across the dashboard and the passenger seat, while Farah sits tall, regal in the wreckage. The car had been her means of getting to work, of supporting her father, so the destruction is not abstract. Yet the photograph refuses narratives of collapse or despair. The flowers sit lightly on the damaged metal, introducing beauty amid the damage. Matar's work suggests that destruction can settle into the fabric of living without defining it.

Another image turns the question of departure into something more intimate. Maria stands barefoot on a pier, the sea stretching wide behind her. She holds a man's hand, though his body remains partially outside the frame. Their hands meet tentatively, and she looks away from him.

Matar recalls that Maria told her, "My relationship with Lebanon is constant breakups. Every time I'm going out with a guy, they want to leave, and I don't want to leave. So it's always goodbyes." Often, Matar says, the process begins with a story like this, and together they decide where the image should take place.

Here, the sea becomes the unspoken third presence in the frame. It represents departure without dramatizing it. The woman's bare feet rest on wet concrete, grounded but close to the edge. The man's body is cropped, already partially absent. Leaving is no longer abstract or geopolitical; it enters the realm of romance, of touch, of the future one person imagines and another resists.



Maria (Always Goodbyes and Boyfriends Who Leave), Beirut, Lebanon, 2024

Some images touch on the repetition of history more literally. In 2006, after a war between Israel and Hezbollah, Matar photographed a young girl and her aunt standing amid rubble. The image became the cover of one of her earlier books. Nearly two decades later, during renewed conflict in 2024, the photograph resurfaced online. Through a chain of recognition, Matar reconnected with the girl, Lynn, now a young woman, and photographed her again, this time inside her aunt's damaged home. The symmetry is unsettling; the same family, the recurrence of war, the echo of an earlier photograph. In the new image, Lynn stands taller, confronting the camera with a soft strength. Time seems to fold in on itself, but she does not vanish within it. The women in these photographs refuse to be contained by the history that moves in circles around them.



Barbie Girl (Lynn), Dahieh, Beirut, Lebanon, 2006



Lynn, Dahieh, Beirut, Lebanon, 2024

The book opens with an essay by Matar, situating the project within a country still living in the aftermath of civil war. Her voice is personal and attentive, describing the urgency of holding onto creativity and self-expression amid instability. Four additional essays expand upon this. Georges Boustany places Matar's photographs within a broader visual history of Lebanon, arguing that they capture the country's defining contradictions – beauty and ruin, fragility and resilience – what he calls “absurdity as a way of life.” Kim Ghattas writes about growing up along Beirut's dividing line during the civil war, tracing how war shapes memory, survival, and one's relationship to the city.

Elliot Josephine Leila Reichert examines Matar's collaborative practice, showing how the women she photographs help shape the images and anchor them within Lebanon's landscapes and histories. Youmna Melhem Chamieh turns to the question of narrative itself, reflecting on how Lebanon's repeated catastrophes strain the limits of story and belief.

Some photographs bleed across full spreads and others are given space to breathe. Landscapes appear between portraits, creating pauses for reflection. The Mediterranean's horizon returns again and again, walls recur, textured surfaces repeat in different light. The sequencing builds through accumulation.



SamyJoe, Beirut, Lebanon, 2020

On 5 March 2026, the work expanded into exhibition form. *Rania Matar: Where Do I Go?* opened at the Sidney and Lois Eskenazi Museum of Art at Indiana University Bloomington, on view through 2 August in the Rhonda and Anthony Moravec Gallery. In the gallery, faces that fit within one's hand expand to meet the viewer at eye level. The physicality of the women, their stance and stillness, along with details one might not notice in the book, register differently when enlarged. Within a Midwestern American context, the photographs encounter a different set of assumptions. For viewers who may know Lebanon primarily through headlines, the exhibition offers another scale of encounter.

The forces that shape Lebanon's present – regional wars, foreign interventions, the long shadow of American and Israeli power – continue to reverberate across its borders and skies. And yet, in Matar's photographs, geopolitics does not eclipse the individual. Each woman stands as her own horizon, her own interior landscape, which is more expansive than the conflicts that press against her. The question persists, as do the women asking it.

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