

Poems†

Sinan Antoon

A Photograph

(Of An Iraqi Boy on the Front Page of the *New York Times*)

he sat
at the edge of the truck
(eight or nine years old?)
surrounded by his family:
his father,
mother,
and five siblings
were asleep
his head was buried
in his hands
all the clouds of the world
were waiting
on the threshold of his eyes
the tall man wiped off the sweat
and started digging
the seventh grave

New York, September 2006

Delving

The sea is a lexicon
of blueness
assiduously read
by the sun
Your body, too
is a lexicon
of my desires
Its first letter
will take a lifetime

Wars

when I was torn by war
I took a brush
immersed in death
and drew a window
on war's wall
I opened it
searching
for something
but
I saw another war
and a mother
weaving a shroud
for the dead man
still in her womb

A Letter to al-Mutanabbi (Street)

You were right
your words are still wings of light
always carrying you to us
(sometimes carrying us to you)
and your name is a green tattoo
on Baghdad's tired face
your street a forehead
of a body beheaded every morning.

Just another chapter
in the saga of blood and ink
you knew so well

I cannot lie to you
I'm quite pessimistic
we are still etching
on the walls of this cave
which is thousands of years long

signs we keep reinterpreting
and myths about a future world
where we don't devour one another
where the sun is friendly
and the seas cannot inherit our fever.

Some of us are digging
a deeper grave
about to embrace us all
they, too, have their engravings,
maps, philosophers, and books

We can only keep dreaming
of a shore for the wind
and dig wells
in the dark
with nails of silence and solitude
we will weave an ocean out of ink
for our myths
and out of words a sail
or a shroud
vast enough for us all.

Every book is a well
around which we sit
and drink to your health
try to live
like you did
with death and after it!

* Abu al-Tayyib al-Mutanabbi (915-956), one of the greatest classical poets of Arabic. Al-Mutanabbi Street in old Baghdad was the cultural heart of the city, home to its book market and a café where the literati congregated every Friday. On March 5th, 2007, a suicide bombing destroyed many of the bookshops and killed twenty six people.

The Milky Way

your nipple

is a rounded decade
of strawberries
my tongue
a tribe
of motherless fingers
climbing
the marble dome
of an atheist temple
angels wail for asylum
I swim in a fountain
of undeciphered languages
but
in the morning
your bra
strangles
my metaphors

Necropolis

I

You cannot not step into the same Baghdad twice.

II

I lean on an invisible wall and gaze at an abyss whose dimensions are Baghdad X Baghdad. The Baghdad of space and the Baghdad of time. It is a vast grave. Open and welcoming. Thousands sit on its thresholds. Others sleep inside. Some wail, others hallucinate. There are those who are laughing. Yes. Laughing. Their mouths and skulls are full of dirt.

“Nothing endures”¹

Wherever I lean, I hear the same echo: death’s pulse crawling on distant walls, on which Iraqis lean as they gaze unto an abyss. They listen to the pulse of death crawling in old bones. And new ones.

III

¹ Heraclitus.

As I write, a crow is perched on my shoulder. It pecks at my heart voraciously and confidently. It is the confidence of one who knows that there are genealogies of pain and archives of blood (never to be looted by anyone). When it has had enough, the blackness in its wings claps away in my sky. Another crow takes its place on my shoulder and pecks.

When I turn and look behind me, I see crows as far as the eye can see. Their feathers are a long night. They are all waiting.

IV

Baghdad is a broken icon, buried in a fertile memory. Engravings on walls, tablets, body parts in books, debris in manuscripts, all carried by the doves and crows of reading. Poems, slogans, wars, invasions, and skulls laughing in nightmares addicted to the night. A night raised by spears and swords, then passed on to missiles and satellites as they monitor the ghosts dancing in and around Baghdad.

In the end, Baghdad is akin to its sisters; mythical and mythologized cities.

Baghdad is the search for Baghdad.

And all this destruction will only polish the selectivity of memory. Nostalgia, too, will do what it usually does. Baghdad is Baghdads: Copies that converse as they are being looted from museums.

Baghdads: maps imagining the Baghdad that was/should/could have been.

They are all original.

They are all false.

V

- Where is Baghdad?
- (T)here.

VI

Its ghosts haunt me. Whenever a city attempts to inhabit me, I tell it that it will have to coexist with Baghdad. Even in New York, I introduced Baghdad to its youngest sister and used to listen to their dialogue inside me. Whenever I roam the streets of Boston or New York, Baghdad accompanies me in my

internal streets. As if every moment is an intersection of Baghdad and what will come.

Baghdad is ink for other cities' paper.

It is the prism I carry and my sensual lexicon. I write the new words and the topography of other cities between its lines.

I sleep in other cities, but always wake up drenched with Baghdad's nightmares.

VII

The archives of memory are open and I will keep storming them so that everything flies away. Death's museums expand and their walls copulate and crawl like a panting desert. My language is a lost caravan. An oasis might wake up every now and then. The storm might rest a bit, but death writes relentlessly and I must read it.

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Sinan Antoon is an Iraqi-born poet, novelist, and translator. He studied English literature at Baghdad University before moving to the United States after the 1991 Gulf War. He did his graduate studies at Georgetown and Harvard where he earned a Ph.D in Arabic Literature in 2006. His poems and essays (in Arabic and English) have appeared in various journals and publications in the Arab world, including *as-Safir*, *al-Akhbar*, *an-Nahar*, *al-Adab*, and *Masharef*, as well as *The Nation*, *Middle East Report*, *al-Ahram Weekly*, *Banipal*, *Ploughshares*, *World Literature Today*, and the *Journal of Palestine Studies*. He has published a collection of poems, *Manshur Muballal bil-Huroob* (A Prism; Wet with Wars, Cairo 2003), which was published in English as *Baghdad Blues* in 2007 by Harbor Mountain Press, and a novel *I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody* in 2007 by City Lights Books. Translations have appeared in Portuguese, German, Norwegian and Italian. His poetry was anthologized in *Iraqi Poetry Today* and *Inclined to Speak*. A new collection of poetry, *Laylun Wahidun fi Kull al-Mudun* (One Night in All Cities) was published in Beirut by Dar al-Jamal (2009). He has also contributed numerous translations of Arabic poetry into English and vice versa. His co-translation of Mahmud Darwish's poetry was nominated for

the PEN Prize for translation in 2004 and his translation of Darwish's last prose book, *In the Presence of Absence*, is forthcoming from Archipelago in 2010. Antoon returned to his native Baghdad in 2003 as a member of InCounter Productions to co-direct/produce the documentary *About Baghdad* about the lives of Iraqis in a post-Saddam occupied Iraq. Antoon is currently an Assistant Professor at New York University.

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