

## A Drop

Absent-mindedly,  
Night forgot a drop of water on your neck  
Absent-mindedly,  
I forgot my soul within it.

Now you have gone, and taken my soul with you.  
Ah, God—  
If, absent-mindedly,  
Your hands stroke that forgotten drop  
You'll see me  
Like a genie  
Appear between them.

*Baghdad 5th of April 1998*

*Reem Qais Kubba*  
translated by Soheil Najm

## From Her Book, One More Time

When  
Her seesaw is me and she is my seesaw  
When  
Her two doves are shivering in my fingers  
And her cup is full of my wine  
When  
Her space is redolent of my kiss  
And her kiss is swimming in my space  
When  
The organ pipes shudder and the violins get drunk  
When  
Golden deer fly through the sky  
And the skin of the earth starts to tremble—  
The pearl of weeping becomes a river of firebrands!  
That's how astonishment always comes out of her book....

*Ahmed Asheikh*  
translated by Soheil Najm

## Illusory Village

O lovely light

Passing away this night of love

You, enthralled by the stories in your blood:

By what the land said to the grass,

What the mountain said to the plains.

O lovely light

A flower is putting a crown on its head,

Conquering my kingdom and the laws of my soul,

And spilling me out in its hands.

I am a drop.

Do you see me?

What would you know of a star

That was not in any sky?

And what would you know of the power of a dream

Were you not, yourself, a dreamer?

What would you know about the masters of wheat

And the pride of the man in shackles

Or the rough mountain women

Or about the blood that opens the wound

Or two hands roaming the wind

Or a horse

Without a rider

Running free

On the mountain?

And what would you know about the whims of the mind

Or about harvest nights?

And what would you know about the body of a woman

That wears its nudity

In the night when the cannons thunder?

In that place, each house is like a village.

The village of the soul opens its windows to see

How houses look on a dark night

How a star falls

How a cloud is killed in the wind

How fields look like medals on the shoulders of the land

How a woman reaches orgasm

Or how the rain slaps me in the frosty nights.

There, hearths are brimful with fire.

A woman in love wears her slumber

Gets up warm in the morning

While another body of hers remains in bed

Pores oozing sweat and wine and lazy sleep.

Wait awhile!

You have gone back to love again

To die on the altar of a woman

Glowing naked

And dying of love every night.

O lovely light

You will dream that you call up the wind,

That you grant the sea a beautiful blowing,

And that you make a mouth for the morning from two kisses.

You will dream that you build temples,

That you toll the bells of an old tower

To announce the dance of the sea,

The wine of Easter,

The staircase to glory.

O you!

Who led us to be so alike?

Who told us to follow the footsteps of water,

To disappear in the wind,

To climb on the rocks,

Draw love on the sands,

Lie upon our two beaches?

The wine alone knew

How to make us magicians.

*Khalil Al-Asadi*

translated by Sadek Mohammed

## Brine on the Wings of Seagulls

[*Al-Sahib, though an Arab himself, led a revolt  
by African slaves against their Arab masters.*]

When the poor negroes lost their first battle,  
the sailors robbed me of my beloved's keepsake  
And washed the smell of the ocean from my body.  
Suddenly, I was a stranger to the sea,  
the sea a stranger to me.  
The water closed its eyes and bowed its head,  
No longer a refuge for the cast-out mariner.  
On the front of my shirt  
I wrote my beloved all that had happened,  
and all that was still to happen:  
I wrote: "Beloved, stretch out your hands—two shores of oleander."  
I laid my shirt on the water  
and, stirred by the hoped-for dawn,  
I called the seagulls to carry my shirt to the beloved.  
But the seagulls passed me by,  
bearing nothing but the sea-brine to the desert.

The water cast back my white shirt, its sleeves tied together.  
Who then takes the mariner's shirt to the beloved?  
Who, on this open sea, can show a cast-out mariner the path to land?  
Who carries the body of this murdered mariner to Basra?  
Who?  
No one but the sea.

The sea looked strange; its shores were locked.  
Basra's negroes, soaked in brine,  
pulled the Indian ships up to the merchants' doors.  
Al-Sahib had not sent his seagulls as a sign of freedom.  
Al-Sahib was sentenced to death  
for rousing the poor negroes against the merchants.  
Tonight, not Basra's palm trees nor the negroes' prayers  
will hide him from the spies, the swinging lanterns in the soldiers' hands.

Tonight, beloved,  
Nothing will shield Al-Sahib  
Against the whips.  
Tonight, beloved,  
No one will rescue the lover  
From the torments of his love.

Beloved....

But love had died inside the mariner.  
All the lovely women had boarded ships, eloped with sailors.  
And the negroes were shivering sparrows, seized by ravenous cats.

Al-Sahib was hanged with a rope of merchants' shirts.  
Beloved,  
If you were there, would you cry,  
or rejoice at the death of this infatuated lover?

When the poor negroes launched their second battle,  
I called on my beloved—  
their plight gave me an angry voice,  
a voice discretion could not silence—  
Beloved, as you swing here and there,  
you split my suffering soul,  
you rock my heart, like a naked lantern glowing in the rain.  
Beloved, you must either give  
your allegiance to the poor negroes or to the merchants.

Tonight, as I passed by,  
I overheard some seamen talking,  
pointing at me, their fingers gilded with tobacco:  
"Last night, the sailors murdered that mariner.  
That mariner—"  
"Hush, lest he hear you—"  
"has a beloved the Basra merchants will slay tonight."

Tonight I will take refuge in my own flesh,  
Not for fear that some spy will follow me and count my steps, and write:

“He passed by a negro, they shook hands,  
a turtledove hid between their palms,”  
but to see you,  
for my flesh is swept by your love.  
And I saw you, let me confess that I saw you  
like a lantern glowing in Basra’s night.  
I saw the seagulls flying, laden with letters from lovers to loved ones,  
and coming back, laden with letters from loved ones to lovers.  
Going and coming, and going and coming again,  
wings no longer weighed down with brine,  
going and coming between the sea and the harbor.  
And I saw Al-Sahib, wrapped in water and wild grass,  
going out in the evening, attended by Basra’s lovers,  
and the negroes, and those  
from distant cities, and Basra’s negro singer, Tuman, enchanted  
with a thousand loves,  
all going to a picnic on the beach of Al-Ashar, on boats  
all filled with oleander.

*Abd Al-Hassan Al-Shathr*  
translated by Haider Al-Kabi

## We Are Not Dead

*For Kadhim Kaitan*

To no avail the doves cooing—  
Our delights are cellars  
And our time is ash.  
We go, every sunset, to the river  
Carrying the coffins of our days  
Polishing our teardrops  
And shrouding our fears.

We are not dead.  
We still have the tearful embrace  
Of sacrifice.  
We compose our features,  
Bandage our calendars,  
Our disappointments,  
And,  
Under a spider’s tent,  
We still have the right  
To conquer the city with kisses.

We return to our hospitals  
Lighting lamps of regret  
And reciting our elegies.  
Our lifetimes are paper boats  
Pushed to the waves by the hand of a trifling child  
Where, fold after fold,  
The sea takes our dreams  
And wraps them in weeping.  
Our lifetimes are withered leaves  
That launched an attack on the sun  
And fell in flames.  
The fire now licks at our names,  
Sewn together with splinters.

*Munthir Abdul-Hur*  
translated by Sadek Mohammed

## The King of Sorrows

For him are all sorrows.  
He describes them sorrow by sorrow  
Then lights candles around them  
And smiles.  
So we crowned him the King of sorrows.

As for us,  
We have only our sole sorrow  
Which we built  
Teardrop by teardrop.  
We watered it  
As mothers suckle their children.  
So they called us slaves  
And christened us  
The slaves of the King of sorrows.

Once,  
The King whose slaves we are  
Looked down at us  
And was amazed  
At the pure nobility of our sole sorrow.  
And, because the King had only common sorrows  
His Majesty issued an edict  
Confiscating our sole sorrow.

Grave will be the days that we endure:  
How can a wretched lot like us,  
Slaves of the King of sorrows,  
Carry on our lives without our sorrow?  
Bereft, we slaves began to chant a hymn:

“Oh bygone days,  
The days of our sole sorrow,  
How wonderful you were!

Why did you abandon us,  
And leave behind  
Boring days, days void of sorrows?  
And you, O gracious King  
Why have you taken from us our sole sorrow?  
Take pity on our children—how can they grow up  
Without a single sorrow?”

*Baghdad, July 16, 1997*

*Abdul-Khaliq Keitan*  
translated by Sadek Mohammed

## A country out of work

Everybody here is out of work:  
The workers in the factories and the officers in the offices,  
All of them are out of work!  
Those going early to the fields  
And coming back tired at noon  
Are also out of work.  
The students and the teachers,  
Whom the government pays handsomely  
To master joblessness, are out of work.  
The army and the police,  
The children and the adults,  
The women in the houses,  
The imams in the mosques—all of them are  
Out of work!  
So long as there are strangers spreading darkness  
Across the land,  
Its children will have no work, except  
The job of bringing sunrise back  
To their extinguished sun.

*Adil Abdullah*  
translated by Soheil Najm

## Flour Below Zero

No sun in our plates  
No shadows  
No oil poured by the moon  
No cloud we may stealthily  
Milk from the sky.  
Here is your share  
Of ostrich feathers  
And here is my share of cigarettes.  
How much is left of the family's share?  
Yesterday, flour ran out.  
Before that, the sugar ran out.  
No tea, no water, no air.  
Eat the ration coupon then  
And when you are full  
Go out to the street.  
Beware of the dolphins  
And the whizzing ghosts!  
Beware of insects!  
Beware of the sun!  
Take your full share of the street....  
What?  
The street has run out!  
Come back to your mothers' breasts then  
Or to their wombs.  
Take your share of darkness.  
But the milk has run out.  
Then go to the river  
Lie on your backs:  
The moon will be a ball  
Between your hands  
And the sun will be a basket  
And you...  
Have you run out of your feathers?  
And me...  
Have I run out of cigarettes?  
Our lives, have they run out?...

Where have you put the girl?  
I wonder  
Whether we have run out of our little daughter.  
Or perhaps they have stolen her?  
Take this weapon  
While I follow their steps.

They are hiding behind the door.  
Their bellies are full.  
Give them milk if you can;  
These are our guests—  
Leave the roof empty for them  
So they can jump onto it.  
Let every one of them take his share.  
These are our thieves—  
Give them shelter from the outdoors  
And never,  
Never slander them.  
Pretend to be busy by loading the gun...  
But the bullets ran out.  
Occupy yourself then  
By watching the stars  
Or, go fetch water—  
We'll knead these books  
And newspapers to make bread.  
Pick up the breadcrumbs from the ground;  
Put them on the moon.  
The moon has a silent light—  
Have a chat with it.

Everything may run out  
Even nothing may run out  
We are in danger  
And the world is a gun.  
Thieves are in danger,  
Bread is in danger.  
Mothers have been stolen from their own tears.

*roof* Saddam's police would sometimes enter houses from the roof.

Tell the children:  
Sleep before the thieves come  
And wake up after the bread comes.  
Switch off the light and tell them  
They have stolen the light from the lamp,  
Just like they stole our old neighbor's ring.  
And if they ask you about the ring,  
Pretend to be busy combing your hair  
Or  
Busy yourself with a prayer....

These are our children:  
They have their share of lies  
And a share of cake and bracelets  
And swings.  
They have wars to lose  
And wars to win.  
These are our children:  
They ate their share  
Of the storm  
And were never sated.  
Their inheritance is war,  
Which they will also share....

But you and I,  
We will depart.  
And when we finally run out of sacrifices,  
You will demand your share of lamentation  
And I  
My share of curses....

*June 1995*

*Kareem Shugaidil*  
translated by Sadek Mohammed

## A Wheat Seed

*For Hasan, who is fond of dates*

Papa  
Papa  
I want dates.  
Take this date stone  
Plant it on the roof of the house  
Water it with your tears  
Or  
Leave it to the teardrops of the sky.  
It will be a palm tree  
With a long trunk  
And fluttering fronds.  
Stand in its shadow  
Eat from its dates  
And of its stripped fronds  
Make a bag.  
Do not draw a bird on the bag:  
Your books may turn  
Into airplanes.  
If you draw a duck on the bag,  
Beware of the river:  
It may slip from your shoulder  
And float all your things  
In the water.  
And if it gets stained from your paints,  
Take a wave from the river and wear it.  
Return to the palm tree:  
Learn from the nightingale  
How to read,  
And from the palm fronds  
How to withstand the wind,  
And from the trunk  
Learn thirst.

Make from its wood  
A boat to save yourself.  
You might draw one day  
A fish.  
Do not tell your friends about your colored shirt:  
The river may dry out.  
Do not tell them about the bag:  
The palm tree may lose its clothes.  
And about the boat  
Do not tell them:  
They may accuse you of lying.  
If you wish, warble to them  
And at the taste of dates  
Let them chant,  
And if they see the palm tree  
Tell them:  
It is the neighbor's palm tree,  
There are no dates in it,  
No nightingales,  
No doves.  
It is a pretend palm tree—  
Our neighbor washed it  
And hung it out in the sun.  
And if you need bread,  
Take this:  
A wheat seed....

1995

*Kareem Shugaidil*  
translated by Sadek Mohammed

## Drawing

The teacher asked the students  
To draw whatever they wanted.  
The son of the principal drew  
A new Chevrolet.  
The son of the developer drew  
A complex of markets and hotels.  
The son of the party member drew  
An armored car.  
And the daughter of the school deliveryman  
Drew a piece of bread.

*Lateef Helmet*  
translated by Soheil Najm

## Shaping

In the noisy restaurant's window  
a little passer-by appeared,  
his face all pale.  
He was only there for two moments,  
and dropped two beads of rain  
on the cold, hard glass.  
He thrust two hungry glances among the dishes,  
and rubbed a small and dirty nose  
on the chilly glass. But the people's eyes  
stared back at him, and he disappeared.  
And the shape of his fleeing face  
remained on the noisy restaurant's glass,  
like a brand stamped in the fog.

*Mahmud Al-Braikan*  
translated by Haider Al-Kabi

## Elegy for a Coffee Shop Waiter

In this vast and desolate place  
Should I carry my table on my back?  
Invite you to my home  
And say: O guest,  
Do you remember our two shadows in the sun  
And our faces staring at the street,  
Here in this vast and empty coffee shop?

Who shook the coffee shop's pine tree  
Over the teacup?

O waiter!  
I have encircled my table  
With four walls  
Lest I see you  
Standing, forever,  
Over my endless silence.

There is nothing but the last day,  
Then the funeral begins.  
One minute,  
And then you will be thronged by passers-by.  
Watch out Ali!  
The tea will be overturned from your hands.  
Watch out Ali!

*Abdul-Kareem Kasid*  
translated by Sadek Mohammed

*A poet dies twice: once when he is published,  
and once when a statue is erected to him.*

—Mahmud Al-Braikan

## Of Freedom

You have invited me to explore  
another continent with you,  
but you wouldn't share the map.  
I would rather sail  
In my simple boat  
And if we chance to meet,  
It will be something to remember.

You have offered me a house,  
Decorated and comfortable,  
In exchange for a song  
That sticks to the instructions.  
I would rather stay  
On my horse's back  
And roam  
From wind to wind.

You have brought me another face,  
Fresh and flawless, ideal in size.  
Thank you, but  
I don't feel like having a glass eye  
Or a plastic mouth.  
I don't want to wipe out differences.  
I don't care for perfect symmetry.  
Thank you, but  
My distance is something I'd prefer to save.  
Is the slave master not, at heart, a slave?

*Mahmud Al-Braikan*  
translated by Haider Al-Kabi

## Affiliations

On the everyday scene  
I fix my gaze. But I have my dream,  
My allegiance to the beautiful and far....

Against the daily clatter I nourish my milk-white voice  
And clothe bare reality in the glow of thought.

I see all history sketched in a single look.  
I hear it—hear its secret pulse—in a single voice.  
But the thought does not frighten me  
Nor does death fascinate me.

And across the stations of grief,  
Across hunger of soul and body,  
Across light and shadow  
I keep seeking eternity.

Alone and free, I belong in a thought  
That the dead wanted (but failed) to engrave on a stone.  
I belong in the voice of primitive prophecies  
In revolutions before their visions freeze  
In heavenly love that the world refuses  
In lightning that reveals the face of the ages in the blink of an eye  
In the brilliant fields of beauty flowering  
In the childlike dream that fades but never dies  
In the part of man that is lost in the dark  
In that which sheds its light where meaning lies  
In that which can't be owned, nor be defined.

*Mahmud Al-Braikan*  
translated by Haider Al-Kabi

## An Attempt at Music

(1)

The music comes down, comes down  
Like a bird, a bunch of grapes, a waterfall  
And my heart flies with the bird  
But my hand does not touch it.  
The bunch of grapes touches my lips  
But there is no love knife to cut our sharp emptiness.  
And the waterfall comes to me and I become water to meet it,  
But I collide with its boulders  
And drown.

(2)

Even the letters wear me out.  
They alone visit me in my vast loneliness,  
Without carrying in their hand a bouquet of sun,  
Or a handful of moon  
Or kisses of feathers.

(3)

Everyone is dressed in someone else's clothes  
Except me.  
And when I found nothing to put on,  
I went out naked...  
Stark naked.

(4)

The music comes down with sweet L's like children's lips,  
Chirping R's, whispering S's  
And dews of D's.

(5)

The music comes  
And I rise from death for it.  
We meet like two orphans  
Yearning for the feast of reunion.

(6)

When I got acquainted with my blood  
I found it besieged with birds.  
And when I got acquainted with my heart  
I found it brimming with alphabets.

(7)

Happiness is a ballerina  
And sadness is a Bedouin sitting on the ground  
Playing on the *rebeck*.

(8)

I liked my death  
But when I tried to repeat it  
I went insane!

(9)

The music comes down, comes down  
And the soul gets lost  
Then vanishes.

(10)

The music melts like silver  
And sleeps like lovers worn out by long parting.  
The music glitters and turns griefs into F  
And F to a freedom  
That dances like a genie.

(11)

What beauty!  
The music plays on  
And the letters sparkle.

(12)

The rich man rejoices at the hotel's harem,  
The singer at the nightclub's *dinars*,  
The playboy at his new mistress.  
But I am like music:  
I only delight in what I find within,  
And only make love with my letters.

(13)

How long will the bleeding of letters torment me:  
The protest of P's  
The loss of L's in cities lost to memory  
The hypocrisy of H's  
The betrayal of B's until death.  
My God!  
How long will the bleeding of letters torment me?

*Adeeb Kamaludin*  
translated by Sadek Mohammed

## Croaking

I cannot stand exile anymore  
And it cannot stand me.  
I shall lose it like I have lost my homeland,  
Palm tree  
By palm tree.  
Maybe I will lose myself as well.  
When that happens,  
I shall stand erect like a hungry crow  
And paint the whole world with my croaking.

1989

*Abdul Kareem Kasid*  
translated by Sadek Mohammed

## The Mirror of the Eye...The Mirror of Memory

This boy  
At a time when sorrow burns in his blood  
Crowned with childhood, charm and stones  
Sits in secret, radiant  
To count the embers of speech in his head  
Turning words and longings loose  
Like flocks of deer and wolves  
In the forests of writing and paper.  
This boy  
Secretly opens a book, the mirror to a visionary eye.  
This boy  
Secretly reads a history,  
Long hidden in memory, until he sees  
A multitude of poets  
Reading their long-lost poetry  
In the resounding country of the void,  
Accompanied by the quiet scritch of mice  
And a thunderous silence....

*Saad Jasim*  
translated by Sadek Mohammed

## Creation

Come close  
O neglected words  
And let me make poems  
Out of you.

## Calendar

Ever since we hung this calendar  
The wall  
Has been oozing blood.  
How could these days  
Be a necklace  
Unless they were pierced  
Through the middle?  
How can you expect us to write  
For coming generations?  
How can we pour our memories  
Into days that have holes in their hearts?

*Ali Al-Imarah*  
translated by  
Sadek Mohammed

## More Than One, Less Than Two

Every line I write, I'm afraid,  
will erase a line from your memory.

What negligent god has left you so derelict?  
What charm has made you write poems?  
You look like a soldier from 1914.  
How charming! How charming!  
How can a poem be possible,  
with so much shrapnel in your chest?  
One splinter is enough to burn a whole volume of poems.  
How can you extract poems and shrapnel from your chest  
at the very same time?  
Our fathers lied to us—  
They had hidden this possibility from us.

How could you have aged and slackened without the passing of time?  
May God grant you a cheerful death!  
You are the furious storm,  
produced by words of peerless calm.

Has my silence worn you out? Has my forgetfulness frightened you?  
Have you flung your hand out searching for me?  
Have you hunted for something? Has something hunted for you?  
Have you trusted that the gravedigger  
will not put a cadaver in the grave,  
but hay and lint and other trash?  
A man is nothing but a nest.  
"How the questions vanished,  
leaving the answers alone!"  
Have you found out who guides all these inhabited wagons,  
and in what direction he is leading them?  
There is no way, neither forward nor backward.  
Who was it, before going to his gardens, threw you here all alone  
in this garbage dump?

I'm afraid you'll say "you".  
I'm afraid.

*Sabah Khattab*  
translated by Haider Al-Kabi

## Doors

I knock on a door  
I open it  
I don't see myself, but a door  
Shaped like me  
I open it  
I enter  
Nothing but another door  
Oh, my God  
How many doors between me and myself!

## Perplexity

My father said:  
Share your vision with no one:  
The road is mined with ears  
And every ear  
Is bound to another by a secret wire  
Until they reach the Sultan.

## Iraq

Iraq that is going away  
With every step its exiles take....  
Iraq that shivers  
Whenever a shadow passes.  
I see a gun's muzzle before me,  
Or an abyss.  
Iraq that we miss:  
Half of its history, songs and perfume  
And the other half is tyrants.

*Adnan Al-Saiq*  
translated by Soheil Najm

## The Black Box

My wife's tears poured down; friends wrote me elegies; dust built up  
on my bookcase and...and...and I did not care.

Worms ate their fill of my flesh, but did not leave, though overstuffed,  
and I did not care.

It was pitch dark when God's angels, like phosphorus inside my grave,  
wrote their report: "This virtuous worshiper of God, devoured by worms,  
is a true believer," and I did not care.

God Almighty Himself visited me (I had decayed; my stench would  
cause gold to rust) and He gently said: "I have read your poem 'Dolphins  
Swimming in God's Tears'" and He assured me that the Judgment Day  
was soon to come, and I did not care.

Some creatures came, and, with great caution, lifted my skeleton and  
placed it in a UFO, and I did not care.

Their skillful, all-powerful devices revived my crumbling bones, and I  
did not care.

The wise devices realized their mistake, and cured me of not caring.  
And then the questions poured out about everything, from my wife's  
tears to the Judgment Day.

And, on a screen in front of me, the answer then appeared:  
"Dear earthly friend: About the past—it's better *not* to care."

*Jamal Mustafa*  
translated by Haider Al-Kabi

Strange and lonely child sitting in a dark garden,  
this is my heart

When I opened the book of the horizon  
The light fell.  
The heart was resounding a song  
With bitter words.  
I beheld, between me and the light  
Walking corpses trying to  
Kidnap my lightning and quench  
My song.  
Listening to the flute,  
The soul slumbered.  
The wounds were resounding:  
*Peace! Peace!*  
The windows were silent  
And the wind severely lashed  
The heart.  
A yellow storm blew up  
And black water sprang  
From my heart. The heart  
Is my inkwell: I'll write  
My sorrow on a soft blue cloud  
To ease the pain.  
My tree shakes its branches,  
Awaken the birds to sing  
The songs that the windows  
Were waiting for,  
Sinking  
In the arms  
Of darkness.  
I'll pluck the mysterious  
Rose  
That sways in the soul:  
The soul, a child  
Strange and lonely,  
Sitting in a dark garden.

Oh, deep soul  
When will they fathom your depths?  
Pure one,  
When will they discover your whiteness,  
Your spring full of  
Endless green?  
Quiet one,  
When will the world be aware  
Of your eloquent silence,  
Flowering with pain,  
Shivering fingers,  
And the heart which never tires  
Of its ink.  
Houses of fog,  
The morning,  
The roses of the far fields,  
The freezing waters,  
And those who sleep on the sidewalk,  
All waiting eagerly  
For the sun.

*Rasmiah Meheibis Zair*  
translated by Soheil Najm

## The Transient Things

Try to sit down with Time,  
To understand him  
And let him understand you.  
Try to reconcile with him.  
Try to forget the conflicts,  
The repeated offenses,  
His axe's strokes.  
Go out with him for a picnic—  
Go to a museum,  
Look at life there  
With its many wonders.  
Be patient, now.  
The museum offers more than history.  
Time may yet show you  
Its beautiful things;  
It may open its treasures before you.  
Yes, there are instruments of war  
In the museum, but  
Be patient, please:  
The museum holds more than just war.  
There are statues,  
There are Venuses,  
There are gardens.  
Be patient with Time—  
Not every tree in his garden  
Conceals a crime.  
Look from an angle  
Less dark:  
Look more at the river,  
And less at the fighting ships.  
Be patient,  
Sit up straight  
When you sit with Time.  
Try to show some respect. Time  
Is not a museum:  
It's the life all around you,  
The fresh air of the fields,  
Filled with the glitter of butterflies,

The songs of birds.  
Don't look on Time as your enemy.  
Enough of war!  
It's just a museum exhibit.  
Whether you choose to go in  
Or stay out,  
Look upon these modern ruins  
As though they, too, were ancient monuments.  
Try to pass by without harm.  
And when you're tired of this museum, freedom  
Can be found in death. Or,  
Why not make a world that's all your own,  
Brimming with creatures who are proud  
Of belonging to you? A world outside this world.  
How can you discover such a world?  
Look! Simply look—  
Look at the beautiful things.  
Take a small vial of perfume  
From the earth.  
Look at the things that are gleaming  
In your hand—the dust and the grain,  
The things that are dear to your heart.  
Take this path to happiness  
And leave the myths behind.  
Don't knock at the doors of kings.  
Walk on,  
Without regret for what you leave behind  
On your little desk.  
Let your footsteps be your country  
And celebrate the road  
As each path hands you onward to the next.  
Delighted, be always delighted.  
Be fruitful like any tree  
Beside a river.  
Take your delight from  
The earth—  
Where else will you find it?  
Go with an elegant grace,  
Even in the midst of ruins,  
And let the world be yours.

Without its sad mythologies,  
Its labyrinths.  
Don't be a builder of castles  
Like Sinmar,  
Don't build a Tower of Babel,  
Don't carry weapons,  
Don't pile up treasure,  
Don't have a grand title.  
Don't engrave your picture  
On a kingdom's coins,  
Or sign your name  
To any secret script.  
Don't be a statue  
In a public square,  
Don't build a museum  
Or be a museum exhibit.  
As you walk this earth,  
Don't be a rare  
And priceless antique,  
Don't cover your face  
With mosaics.  
Don't play the buffoon,  
Or the martyr.  
Put your exile  
On the tip of your tongue,  
And say a kind word with a smile,  
Without a trace of arrogance or grandeur.  
Kind words and lovely smiles  
Don't consort with arrogance or grandeur.  
The house of your love  
Is the nightingale's tear drops.  
Be sure to tell him: I love you  
From the heart of my heart.  
From the heart of my heart,  
I love you.  
The house of your love  
Is the nightingale's wings.

*Ra'ad Abdulqadir*  
translated by Soheil Najm

## My Brother's War

Get up, brother; the war is over.  
They have taken your tank to the smelter  
But your rifle still lies on the mountain.  
At last, the sand has erased your courage  
And farmers plant fields where you fell.  
The trees you planted  
Have died. The enemy flooded the mountain  
You vowed you would never abandon.  
And from its ice-capped peak,  
They lowered your banner, which always stood steadfast  
Until the day of your downfall.  
The enemy plundered your uniform and your splendor  
And no matter how dead you were  
They kept crumpling your corpse with their bullets.  
Even with worms coming out of your eyes,  
Out of your big heart,  
They couldn't believe you were dead—  
You had been such a nightmare to them.  
Get up, brother; the war is over.  
The children have surrounded the garden.  
The balls of fire and metal  
Have cooled, and  
The children now kick them around—  
Except for the ball that fell next to you  
And tore you out of your body.  
We're back in the village now,  
Without war and without enemies.  
Horizons of dewy nightingales  
Form themselves under our pillows.  
We have forgotten some of our wounds, and though  
Our daggers may remember our old hatred,  
All we really want  
Is that our dogs not bark for anyone  
Except our guests.

My mother is still in bed.  
I talked to her about your height and your strong arm  
And it delighted her  
That they couldn't find shoes that fit you.  
She asked me  
On which side you were sleeping  
And it saddened me to tell her  
That you had not slept for seven years,  
That a shell from a huge strong cannon  
Crushed your ribs  
And stripped you of your youth.  
So I let the sun set  
Upon your names and dreams,  
Let lie at rest the scattered dust  
You have become.  
Between your life, your death, there lies  
A distance of six children.

1993

*Taleb Abd Al-Aziz*  
translated by Haider Al-Kabi

## The Hanging Gardens of Death

It is your country, oh fool,  
Even if its land is too narrow for a rose.  
It is your country, oh enchanted one,  
Even when it is hard to find a song to console you.  
Oh lonely passer by,  
It is your country, you who are wounded by the injuries of hope.  
It is your country, your sad sonata, your country  
Even when clouds of turbans closed its horizon.  
Your country even when the swords of veiled men closed its windows,  
Even when its routes were mined with bombs.  
It is your country, your melancholy song and the graves of your dear ones.  
It is your country: your weapon, the song of the desperate. Your country  
Even when the chariots of its dreams were broken in the burning daybreak.  
It is your country, its roses your roses  
Even when it turned its Babylon  
Into Hanging Gardens of death.  
It is your country, your beloved and your country  
Even when it kneaded the clay of its dawn with the blood  
Of holy men and the tears of chaste women.  
This is the widows' republic, your country and the captive of your soul,  
And then the republic of fear.  
Your country, a daffodil in Karkh  
Befriending the dew of daybreak prayer.  
Your country, even when its sweetest hearts  
Are in the graveyards.  
It is your country or your torment,  
Your country or your despair,  
Your country or the ashes of your hopes: there is no difference.  
It is your country and your intimate lover,  
Your dream's companion and the river of your grief.  
It is your country: you, tormented and expelled.  
Your country, you who take refuge in exile  
From the hot sands of its valley.

It is your country and the woodcutter of memory  
In your soul's forest, your country  
Even when the wings of its doves were broken,  
Even when the angels left its holy cities.  
It is your country even when its thorns  
Crowd the roses of your heart,  
Your country even when its shrapnel pierced  
The arm of Mary in her churches.  
It is your country and the princess of your heart,  
Then it is the night that fell on Baghdad,  
And still it is your country, even when the train of its days  
Has stopped at lost stations, its rails turned to rust.  
It is your country, oh loser in the garden of evil winners.  
And still, it is sonata roses and the cooing of doves:  
Your country is the hope on her lips  
Like the sun on a chilly day.  
It is your country that sings its own requiem, your country  
When even its victories felt cold as defeat.  
It is your country and the nun of hope in your broken cities,  
Your country, a candle  
Besieged with barbed wire.  
It is your country, even when happiness was outlawed.  
And still, it is the princess of your heart:  
It is your sonata, even when life was a hollow drum in an empty city.  
It is the tenderness that penetrates when you have lost the way  
Back to your homeland,  
The sweetness of Baghdad's jasmine and the sadness  
Of its river banks.  
It is your country and the burning of your home. Your country  
Even when its hopes are desert wastes, like the passage  
From Heet to Arar.  
It is the country you grieved, the grindstone of your fear  
And all your losses.  
The country that weighed you with longing, despair, yearning and love,  
Your country, where the honey of tomorrow ripens  
in the bitterness of today,

Where your insides sing out your sonata.  
Your country of secret gardens,  
Where hope grows in hiding, like a black lily.  
Your country is rising from the ashes of your heart:  
It is your country, oh fool: princess of your dreams and your sonata,  
Last song left standing in Baghdad,  
Tender and filled with love.  
The sails of its tomorrow are ripped and torn, but... it is smiling.

*Baghdad*  
*August 2004*

*Ali Abdulameer*  
translated by Soheil Najm

## Oh Humanity

Oh humanity  
I am your grateful son.  
Every man my father's age  
Is my father.  
Every woman my mother's age  
Is my mother.  
All these little ones  
Are my children,  
And this dog  
Sitting beside me  
Is my friend.  
Oh humanity,  
Oh my family,  
I am your grateful son.

*Ali Al-Bazaz*  
translated by Soheil Najm

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*Book titles are translated from Arabic.*

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