

# FLOWERS OF FLAME

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UNHEARD VOICES OF IRAQ

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EDITED BY

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## WELCOME

*Dan Veach*

**D**espite years of war and tsunamis of sound bites, this will be the first opportunity many readers will have to meet Iraqis as real human beings, speaking heart to heart. In these pages you will hear the unheard voices of Iraq: men and women, Sunnis, Shias, and Kurds.

These poems were collected, as the war raged all around them, by Iraqis living and working in Baghdad. This is their message to the world, one that transcends all the barriers dividing present-day Iraq. It is a message that needs to be heard by all sides in the current conflict.

Iraq's poets have suffered imprisonment, exile, and death for the truths they have dared to tell. Poetry is not a luxury in Iraq, but a vital part of the struggle for the nation's future. This is poetry that is feared by tyrants and would-be tyrants.

How do they do it? How is it even possible to write poetry in present-day Iraq? One poet asks himself, "How can you extract poems and shrapnel from your chest at the very same time?" The answers that you'll find here will amaze you—a "perfect storm" of international headline news, profound humanity, and genuinely great art.

You'll find joy here as well as struggle. Arabic poetry has a long and rich tradition of ecstatic love, whimsical humor, and philosophic insight. Remarkably, charm and lightness of touch abound. Even the war invites you to a picnic—from which you will not return untouched.

These poems form a continuous "conversation," each one speaking to and illuminating those around it. The subjects taken up in turn are war, love, the daily life of the people, and the inner life of the artist. An Iraqi emergency room physician in Baghdad, someone who has surely seen the worst of the current conflict, recently read this collection in English. When he told us that these poems had brought him to tears, I knew that we had captured at least a little of the truth about Iraq.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE POEMS

Many of these poems were written in response to the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. “Tomorrow the War Will Have a Picnic,” for instance, was composed on the eve of the “shock and awe” campaign against Baghdad. We see here, through Iraqi eyes, the fall of Saddam’s statue, his trial, the ongoing sectarian violence, and the foreign invaders on both sides of the struggle.

Others reflect the fact that Iraq has been at war for a long, long time. Almost immediately after taking power, Saddam plunged Iraq into a war with Iran that lasted from 1980 to 1988 and cost, by some estimates, a million lives between the two sides. Nothing was gained, and the economies of both countries were ruined by the conflict.

Iraq’s desperate financial situation after the war figured largely in Saddam’s decision to invade oil-rich Kuwait, which led to the 1991 Gulf War with the United States. Before and during the war, the United States encouraged the Iraqi people—by means of radio broadcasts, air-dropped leaflets and public speeches by President Bush—to overthrow Saddam Hussein. Hopeful of American support, the Iraqi people did rise up against Saddam at the war’s end, and actually succeeded in taking over most of the provinces of Iraq.

However, America stood by as Saddam crushed the poorly armed rebellion. American troops were instructed not to aid the rebels in any way, and Saddam’s attack helicopters were allowed to fly freely in the “no fly” zones. The result was a terrible slaughter: more than a hundred thousand Shiites and Kurds were killed and buried in mass graves such as the one described in “Bags of Bones.”

Saddam, himself a Sunni Arab, had a long history of torturing and persecuting Iraq’s majority Shiite population and its Kurdish ethnic minority. Many of the poets in this book have been driven into exile. Others were killed or “disappeared” during his regime. For them, and for those who lie buried in mass graves across Iraq, these poems remain as a lasting monument.

## THE VIEW FROM BAGHDAD

*Sadek Mohammed*

Soheil Najm and I started work on an anthology of Iraqi poetry in the summer of 2005, immediately after my return from a self-imposed exile in various countries. Everything was different in the country and in our city, Baghdad. Life was absolutely impossible. There was no electricity, no fuel, and no potable water. Even if we wanted to meet, we had to take our chances through car bombs, roadside bombs, mortar shelling, and the death squads that were massacring the city. A translator was, indeed, perceived as a traitor in that hellish atmosphere, and many were assassinated under the pretext of being collaborators with the “occupation forces.”

There were many moments in which I wanted to abandon this work. It was Soheil’s inexhaustible patience and solid belief in the importance of what we were doing that kept me going on. But above all I was getting a real therapeutic effect from the poetry itself, especially that of the poets who had remained in Iraq and who, in spite of the suffocating atmosphere, were able to express creatively the permanent concerns of the Iraqi soul and its yearning for beauty, freedom, justice, and peace.

We have three generations of poets here, according to the traditional classification of poets in Iraq. A generation is conceived, according to this classification, as a group of poets who started to write and first became known in a certain decade. In reality, all of the poets in this anthology can be classified as one generation. Historically, they all belong to the same era. Artistically, they all use the free verse form of modern Iraqi poetry, which was primarily initiated in Arab poetry by Nazik Al-Malaeka, Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab, Abdul Wahab Al-Bayati, and Buland Al-Haidari. Thematically, the majority of them deal with injustice, war, isolation, alienation, exile, poverty, the will to live in the face of the death forces, and the yearning for beauty. One can safely say that all of their poetry is an outcry against the forces that were depriving the Iraqi soul of its basic rights.

Since the 1970s, only a small, fortunate group of Iraqi poets have been translated. The majority have been marginalized or neglected. They were writing in very difficult times: every word was scrutinized by a brutal, ignorant censorship. “You are either with us or against us” was the motto of the merciless guardians of the literary establishment. “With us,” according to the logic of the authorities, meant chanting hymns in praise of the dominant ideology and the futile wars of its leaders. “Against us” meant any suspicion of free, independent thinking, whether or not it threatened their ideology or their leader.

It was a difficult period that witnessed the migration or, indeed, the exile of the best of the best of the Iraqi talents. Thus, two categories came into being: “residing poetry” and “exile poetry.” Those who continued to live in Iraq rarely knew about what was written in exile and vice versa. They took separate paths in their evolution and enrichment, until they became two separate entities. But both remained attached to the land of their birth.

This created the problem of locating “exile poetry” from Iraqi poets who had migrated to every corner of the world. Furthermore, not all “residing” poets enjoyed the luxury of getting their poetry formally published. Many of them were personally typing and photocopying their collections, which were privately circulated among a narrow circle of friends and acquaintances.

The fear of not finding adequate literary material from this period was a valid one. But when I carried my idea of translating contemporary Iraqi poetry to my friend, the renowned poet and translator Soheil Najm, he put in my hands a treasure of sources that he had been meticulously collecting and archiving through the years. He also contacted scores of Iraqi poets, in Iraq and all over the world, and asked them to send their poetry. Had it not been for him, a timid introvert like me would not have been able to contribute anything to a work such as this. And so we agreed to prepare and translate this anthology together.

## A NOTE ON ARABIC VERSE

Modern Iraqi poets in the late 1940s felt that the meters of traditional Arabic poetry were too rigid to be followed. There are fifteen different meters of rhymed traditional Arabic poetry. A meter is called a *bahr*, which translates literally as “sea” in English. A “sea” is based on a complex system of systematically alternating longer and shorter syllables. In addition to this there is the rhyme scheme, which is determined by the last consonant sound of a word. Normally, a single rhyme is used, even in poems of 100 lines or more.

Traditional poems employ one meter and one rhyme scheme, and both are followed rigorously throughout the poem. Some poets felt that following the metrics of traditional Arabic poetry was a hindrance to their ability to express themselves freely. So they devised a new style of writing which allowed the use of a variety of traditional meters within one poem, as well as greater freedom in the rhyme scheme. They called this new way of writing *shi’ir hur*, which translates as “free poetry.” This was a literary revolution that radically changed the entire Arab literary scene and marked the beginning of modernist Arabic literature.

The impetus for this development came from many sources. It arose at a time of revolutions and liberation from the colonial powers, mainly the Ottomans and the British. This history inspired its literary equivalent in the form of a revolt against the classical ways and the liberation of poets from the rigidities of tradition. Socio-culturally, the traditional ways of writing poetry were seen as unsuited to the new forms of social life and the great strides being made on the road of modernization. Educationally, a high level of literacy enabled many writers to get acquainted with world literature and its major figures, sometimes in translation and sometimes in the mother tongue. The four pioneer Iraqi poets who initiated this break with tradition were influenced by T. S. Eliot and Edith Sitwell.

This innovative evolution was taken a step further by Arab poets in other countries (primarily Syria and Lebanon), who entirely did away with the traditional metrics of Arabic poetry. The influence of Arthur Rimbaud and the French Symbolists was a major factor in this development. The resulting “prose poetry” was seen as the final frontier of expression for modernist Arabic poetry. Many Iraqi poets followed suit, regarding prose poetry as the natural outcome of the modernist trend that had been initiated by their Iraqi brethren. The resulting clash between traditionalist and modernist Arab poetry is still being felt even to this day.

## A POETRY WORKSHOP NAMED IRAQ

Haider Al-Kabi

Early in July 2006, Soheil Najm, Iraqi poet and translator, sent me from Baghdad the English translation of an anthology of Iraqi poetry from 1970 to the present, compiled and translated by himself and Dr. Sadek Mohammed. Though then unfinished, the anthology presented a sweeping, panoramic, and fresh view of the poetry of present-day Iraq. It vividly reflected the grim atmosphere that envelops the country today, the stark and harsh reality of the predicament of the Iraqi people, their worries and fears and hopes and dreams and, above all, their resolve to triumph over the nightmarish circumstances surrounding them.

For my part, I was working on translating poems by some of my departed friends, such as Adam Hatem, Mahmud Al-Braikan, and Abd Al-Hassan Al-Shathr, friends whom I always admired for the indestructible and rebellious spirit manifested in their poetry and in their personalities. Paying homage to our lifelong friendship, I started with Adam Hatem, who had led a life overwhelmed with misery and suffering, running away from political oppression in his homeland, only to die in Lebanon, weighed down with poverty, hunger, and homelessness. When I sent my translation of his poem “That Is My Life” and one of Soheil’s poems to *Atlanta Review*, it never occurred to me that I would find myself all of a sudden involved in a larger project, one in which the whole spectrum of more than three decades of Iraqi poetry would be represented.

In his response, Dan Veach, *Atlanta Review*’s editor, asked me if I was able to participate in the making of a special issue dedicated to Iraqi poetry. Readily I answered in the affirmative, thanks to Soheil and Sadek, who had entrusted their work to me. So I added my translations to theirs and sent the whole collection to Dan, for him to choose from.

My communication with my friends in Iraq was not all that easy. Apart from the costliness of phone calls to Iraq, my friends’ telephones

were frequently dead, and access to their email boxes was repeatedly blocked. At times, it took me more than a month to get an answer to an email, and some never seem to have reached them at all. Regular mail, however, was much more frustrating. Now if that was the case with poets who were known to us, what about those others, inside and outside Iraq, of whose contact information we knew nothing?

Technicalities aside, there is something very important for the reader to bear in mind. In a society torn among political factions like modern Iraq, it would be unthinkable, from the government's point of view, for an Iraqi artist, especially a poet, not to have an allegiance to some political entity or other. "Allegiance" was expressed either by membership in a political party or through the sentiments reflected in the poet's writing. Accordingly, poets were classified either as proponents or opponents of the system. Notwithstanding their artistic merits, poets opposing the regime were deliberately overlooked; those supporting it were brought to the fore. During the thirty-odd years in which the Baath Party and Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime ruled the country, many poets, some of whom were endowed with considerable talents, were transformed either by temptation or intimidation into mere propagandists.

On the other hand, some of the most distinguished poets, such as Mohammad Mahdi Al-Jawahiri, Buland Al-Haidari, Lamee'a Abbas Amara, Saadi Youssef, Fadhil Al-Azzawi, and Muzaffar Al-Nawwab, fled the country. Most of the aforementioned poets had experienced imprisonment; some, for instance Buland Al-Haidari, were under death sentence and were released only because of their reputation as poets. Others, such as Mahmud Al-Braikan, the only poet from earlier generations represented in this selection, had distanced themselves from the literary scene and resorted to silence. But whereas notable poets had been spared the worst, younger poets were more susceptible to government oppression. Being unknown, their disappearance would pass unnoticed. Thus many younger Iraqi poets also went into exile. Against such a background of

agitation, division, and conflict, a mixed feeling of bitterness, distrust, and at times hostility existed among poets of different political stances.

As a result, the making of a comprehensive poetry anthology in today's Iraq is a truly intimidating task. First of all, one must overcome one's own feelings toward those poets whose political stand opposes one's own. Next, one has to have access to poets scattered all over the planet. Then, one needs to convince those poets to participate.

Besides all this, one must consider the multiplicity of languages in which Iraqi poets write: some in Arabic, some in Kurdish, some in Turkoman. Poems originally written in languages other than Arabic had to be rendered into Arabic first. Then comes the translation of the selected poems into English. Only those few who have tackled literary translation from Arabic into English can describe the agony, pain, and frustration associated with such an undertaking. It is truly impressive that such an achievement was accomplished by two individuals working alone amidst the circumstances described above, equipped only with their determination to bring to the world an authentic and up-to-date picture of that huge poetry workshop named Iraq.



## A PRESENT

Come.  
You won't regret it.  
It is a small miracle  
that God granted me.  
Come.  
A green  
rose.  
A bottle  
whose perfume  
is never drained,  
that encircles you like a halo.  
There,  
you'll see it, you'll smell it, you'll hear it.  
It is a poem hanging  
from  
its hair  
like a chandelier in my grave.  
Take it.

JAMAL MUSTAFA  
*translated by Haider Al-Kabi*

## THE HEART OF A WOMAN

The heart of a woman is the only country  
That I can enter without a passport,  
Where no policeman  
Asks me for my card  
Or searches my suitcase  
Full of contraband joys  
Forbidden poems  
And delicious sorrows.  
The heart of a woman is the only country  
That does not heap up heavy weapons  
Nor force its citizens to fight its wars.

LATEEF HELMET

*translated by Soheil Najm*

## THE PREY

Like a flock of eagles on their wounded prey  
The furies have descended on Iraq  
In spite of all their hatred for each other.  
Each night they return to their lairs  
Under the wing of darkness,  
Oblivious to the blood  
That smears their mouths.  
But shame will seize their souls  
When they discover, in the morning light  
The prey they feasted on last night  
Was the flesh of their own children.

ADIL ABDULLAH

*translated by Soheil Najm*

# NIGHT PRAYERS

from *Slightly Quarrelsome Texts*

You see your God only  
In blades and blood.  
I see Him  
In a word,  
In a song,  
In the deep blue of her eyes,  
And in the sea. . . .

You, whose life passes by so fast  
Spend all your time  
Disputing of God and Satan,  
And can't spare a single moment  
To understand  
The heart of your fellow man. . . .

My God  
Is One.  
He is neither a Catholic,  
Nor a Protestant,  
Neither a Sunni  
Nor a Shia'a.  
Those who divide Him up,  
Who interpret Him,  
Who fabricate His sayings,  
Who classify Him  
According to their faiths,  
Their demands,  
Their constitutions  
And their armies—  
They are the ones who deny  
The truth of God.

ADNAN AL-SAYEGH

*translated by Soheil Najm*

## BAGS OF BONES

What luck!  
At last she has found his bones.  
His skull is also in the bag.  
The bag in her hand  
Is just like all the other bags  
In other shivering hands.  
His bones look like thousands of bones  
In the mass graveyard.  
But his skull is unlike  
Any other skull.  
Two eyes, two holes—  
He saw too much through them.  
Two holes for ears  
To let the music in.  
The story of this skull  
Is his alone.  
A nose  
That is just an empty gap,  
A mouth open  
Like an abyss—  
It was not like this  
When he kissed her  
There, quietly  
Far from this place  
With its clatter of skulls, bones, and dust.  
This place where all our questions are exhumed:  
What does it mean to die all this death  
In a place where darkness plays  
The instrument of silence?  
What does it mean to meet  
Your loved ones now  
With all these holes?

To give your mother back,  
 On the occasion of death,  
 The handful of bones  
 She offered you  
 On the occasion of birth?  
 What does it mean that you depart  
 Without a death certificate?  
 The dictator does not give a receipt  
 When he takes your life.  
 The dictator must have a heart,  
 Perhaps a balloon that never bursts.  
 And a skull too: a huge one,  
 Unlike any other.  
 His skull, alone, has figured all this out—  
 How to multiply one death by millions  
 To equal the country.  
 He is the director of this tragedy,  
 And as his audience applauds  
 It shakes the bones,  
 The bones in the bags,  
 The full bag in her hand at last.  
 Her luck, at least a little better  
 Than her neighbor, who, alas  
 Still goes on looking  
 For her bag  
 Of bones.

DUNYA MIKHAIL  
*translated by Sadek Mohammed*