

PEN INTERNATIONAL

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Context: The Middle East Contexte: Le Moyen-Orient Contexto: El Medio Oriente

The magazine of International PEN
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El periódico de PEN Internacional

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CONTEXT: THE MIDDLE EAST PEN CHARTER

The PEN Charter is based on resolutions passed at its international congresses and may be summarised as follows:

PEN affirms that:

- 1 Literature knows no frontiers and must remain common currency among people in spite of political or international upheavals.
- 2 In all circumstances, and particularly in time of war, works of art, the patrimony of humanity at large, should be left untouched by national or political passion.
- 3 Members of PEN should at all times use what influence they have in favour of good understanding and mutual respect between nations; they pledge themselves to do their utmost to dispel race, class and national hatreds, and to champion the ideal of one humanity living in peace in one world.
- 4 PEN stands for the principle of unhampered transmission of thought within each nation and between all nations, and members pledge themselves to oppose any form of suppression of freedom of expression in the country and community to which they belong, as well as throughout the world wherever this is possible. PEN declares for a free press and opposes arbitrary censorship in time of peace. It believes that the necessary advance of the world towards a more highly organised political and economic order renders a free criticism of governments, administrations and institutions imperative. And since freedom implies voluntary restraint, members pledge themselves to oppose such evils of a free press as mendacious publication, deliberate falsehood and distortion of facts for political and personal ends.

La charte du PEN est basée sur les résolutions adoptées à ses Congrès Internationaux, et peut être résumée comme suit:

Le PEN affirme que:

- 1 La littérature ne connaît pas de frontières et doit rester la devise commune à tous les peuples en dépit des bouleversements politiques et internationaux.
- 2 En toutes circonstances, et particulièrement en temps de guerre, le respect des oeuvres d'art, patrimoine commun de l'humanité, doit être maintenu au-dessus des passions nationales et politiques.
- 3 Les membres de la Fédération useront en tout temps de leur influence en faveur de la bonne entente et du respect mutuel des peuples; ils s'engagent à faire tout leur possible pour écarter les haines de races, de classes et de nations, et pour répandre l'idéal d'une humanité vivant en paix dans un monde uni.
- 4 Le PEN défend le principe de la libre circulation des idées entre toutes les nations et chacun de ses membres a le devoir de s'opposer à toute restriction de la liberté d'expression dans son propre pays ou dans sa communauté aussi bien que dans le monde entier dans toute la mesure du possible. Il se déclare en faveur d'une presse libre et contre l'arbitraire de la censure en temps de paix. Le PEN affirme sa conviction que le progrès nécessaire du monde vers une meilleure organisation politique et économique rend indispensable une libre critique des gouvernements, des administrations et des institutions. Et comme la liberté implique des limitations volontaires, chaque membre s'engage à combattre les abus d'une presse libre, tels que les publications délibérément mensongères, la falsification et la déformation des faits à des fins politiques et personnelles.

Los Estatutos del PEN se basan en las resoluciones aprobadas durante sus Congresos Internacionales y pueden resumirse así:

El PEN afirma que:

- 1 La literatura, aunque de origen nacional, no conoce fronteras, y debe permanecer como moneda común entre los países, aunque existan conflictos políticos o internacionales.
- 2 En toda circunstancia, y especialmente en tiempo de guerra, las obras de arte, y el patrimonio de la humanidad en general, deben permanecer intactos y protegidos de las pasiones nacionalistas o políticas.
- 3 En todo momento, los miembros del PEN deben hacer uso de la influencia que posean en favor del buen entendimiento y del mutuo respeto entre las naciones; deben comprometerse a hacer lo máximo por erradicar odios raciales, de clase y entre naciones; y deben promover el ideal de una humanidad que viva en paz, en un mundo solidario.
- 4 El PEN defiende el principio de la transmisión sin barreras del pensamiento, dentro de cada nación, así como entre las naciones. Sus miembros se comprometen a oponerse a toda forma de supresión de la libertad de expresión en su país de origen y dentro de la comunidad a la cual pertenecen, así como en el ámbito mundial dondequiera que esto sea posible. El PEN se declara partidario de una prensa libre y se opone a la censura arbitraria en tiempos de paz. Cree que el avance necesario del mundo hacia formas políticas y económicas altamente organizadas hace que la libre crítica de los gobiernos, de las administraciones e instituciones sea imperativa. Y, puesto que la libertad implica una restricción voluntaria, los miembros se comprometen a oponerse a vicios informativos tales como publicaciones insidiosas; falsedad deliberada de los acontecimientos y distorsión de los hechos con fines políticos y personales. Ser miembro del PEN es una opción asequible y sin distinción de nacionalidad, lengua, raza, color o religión a todos los autores debidamente calificados, a los editores y traductores que se acojan a estos propósitos.

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Editor's Note

Welcome to the second issue of *PEN International* online and to the magazine's ongoing 'Context:' series, celebrating the literatures of the world. Our aim is to provide thrilling glimpses of contemporary writers in unexpected encounters, inviting readers to deepen their familiarity with the writers they know while introducing them to those they don't. Put simply, we wish to enquire of the world: 'So, what are you writing about these days?'

One of our special guest writers for this issue, the Syrian-Lebanese master Adonis, has contributed a newly translated poem so fully blooded that we can take inspiration not only from the work itself but from the example of a writer who has stayed so passionate over the decades. Moniro Ravanipour, our second guest writer, is a fierce champion of the right to write: she waited seven years in her native Iran for a permit from the Islamic Culture and Guidance Ministry to publish her first collection of short stories, and it took ten years for her third novel to be published. She has had to endure persecution in the name of 'national security', and publishers interested in her work have been threatened. But through it all, she continues to write. We welcome her. (Her work will be available in the expanded printed edition of the magazine; to subscribe, please get in touch.)

Notions of 'place', perhaps unsurprisingly, colour many of the works featured in this issue. Raja Shehadeh considers, with a mixture of dismay and profound affection, the transformation of the Palestinian natural environment; Jonathan Garfinkel sets out on his first encounter with Israel and Palestine in a model of honest enquiry, opening himself up to questioning, without abandoning who he is; Mai Yamani re-examines the possibilities of Mecca as Islam's cosmopolitan hub.

Here, too, Iranian Majid Naficy mourns Baghdad's Booksellers' Row; American-born Malu Halasa re-imagines her Jordanian family; Nancy Hawker uncovers a hidden Jerusalem; and the late Mai Ghoussoub, returning to Lebanon following the 2006 war, recalls again exactly what it is about that country that bewilders and seduces her.

'Regions' are convenient concepts with flexible borders, entities abstracted for the purposes of gaining our bearings in fluid, dynamic spaces with no beginnings and no ends. We hope, with 'Context:', that you'll choose to start somewhere, anywhere – and end up somewhere else wholly unexpected and utterly compelling. Enjoy the journey.

Mitchell Albert, Editor
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The next issue of PEN International will take as its theme 'The Writer Next Door' and will be available in April 2008, followed by 'Context: Latin America' in September.

Majid Naficy

On Booksellers' Row, Baghdad

On 5 March 2007 a suicide bomber detonated his car in Baghdad's famous booksellers' market on al-Mutanabbi Street, named for the great Arab poet (915-65 AD)

I saw al-Mutanabbi returning from Persia.
He had heard the sound of Tigris, by the Kor River,
calling him back to Baghdad.

On his way, he gave his sword
to the Qarmati rebels in Gonaveh
because he knew that from then on
he would have no friend but the pen.

He told himself:

‘I, al-Mutanabbi, poet, prophet and swordsman,
moved into the desert from Kufa
with the bedouins of Qarmati revolt
looking for the secret of brotherhood.

I went to Aleppo with Prince Sayf of Hamdan
to stand against the Frankish Crusaders
and travelled to Persia with King Azod of Daylaman
to spread the seed of Arabic poetry.

Now I want to return to Iraq
only to look from the bridge in Baghdad
at the fishermen in their nutshell boats
gently rowing on the Tigris River.

I want to see the gnostic Mandaean in their white towels
making ablutions in the shallow waters
while looking at the North Star,

and in the diners on Abu Nuwas Street
I want to buy lentil soup and *mazgoof* fish
barbecued on pomegranate sticks.

How joyful it is to stroll
near the reeds by the river
and watch the kisses of a young couple
from behind a palm tree.

How joyful it is to sit by the old harpist

and listen to the story of the Tigris
rushing from the mountains to the Gulf.
How happy it is going to the *hammam*
before the *muezzin* calls to prayer
and surrendering one's body to caressing fingers,
cotton washcloth and bubbling soap,
and when taking dry towels
asking the receptionist for a glass of ice water,
then, in a happy mood,
going to the House of Wisdom
and seeing the dazzled joy
in the eyes of the youths.'

Al-Mutanabbi told himself:

'I am becoming a child again
Enchanted with playing words.'

Looking down from the bridge in Baghdad
al-Mutanabbi saw nothing but blood
running constantly in the Tigris.

Fishermen were hunting the dead,
farmers planting human bones,
mothers giving birth to headless babies
behind bushes and sand dunes.

The beheaded ran in the shallow waters
and the water-sellers shouted in the alleys:

'Fresh blood! fresh blood!'

On Booksellers' Row, a red fog
had covered the sky and the earth;
Muhammad, the binder, was looking in the ruins
For the cut-off head of his brother;
Abu Hussein, the hummus-peddler,
was talking to one of his son's shoes;
Shatri, the bookseller, was shedding tears,
running behind the half-burned leaves of poetry
in the alleys on the eastern side of the Tigris,
humming one of al-Mutanabbi's couplets:

'Even the blind can see the letters
and the deaf hear the sound of my poetry.'

Al-Mutanabbi stood.

His robe clung to his skin
and his headdress was wet with blood.

He asked himself:
 'People or books?
 Books or people?'
Should he put down the pen
and take up the sword again?
The Tigris did not answer;
It was running fast
like an arrow shot from a bow.

SPECIAL GUEST WRITER

Adonis

I Imagine a Poet

A salute to Jacques Berque

I imagine a poet
in Beirut, sister to Anatolia, friend of Athens,
a poet who stands with his friend Jacques Berque at the gate
of the sea
leaning on his cane
imagining that his voice is a tambourine,
that the tambourine is broken in his throat,
that his throat is a fire named God.

I imagine a poet
into whose innards history rains,
into his words and between his feet,
and who rains blood that some carry as if a banner made of sky.

Goddess of doubt, you who were born in the lap of our mother
the sea,
why do you not announce this poet and his friend?
Say what you do not see,
what turns time on its back,
what holds the wind standing on tiptoe,
what pours the ashes of silence on the flames of speech
improvised by the world's prose.
Announce also the inflamed eyelashes
the severed hands
the withered days
and whether the lantern is a throat or a head
and how we can distinguish today between an insect and
a flower?
And say is there a means now
to colonize the clouds
and say

how this Mediterranean still needs
to re-emerge from the childhood of the alphabet.

Alphabet, how brave they are these cicadas that inhabit your
harvest,
how ferocious these angels that lie in the beds of your
forgetfulness!

René Char
where is the storm then,
and why is poetry still an ally of the waves
and why has the sky left nothing of our history
except statues whose genitals have been lopped?

The poet leaning on his stick
standing at the gate of the sea, with his friend
Jacques Berque
whispers to his friend, or perhaps to the waves:
'If there is a sky, it is migration'
and his friend replies, also whispering,
'No
the miracle is not above
it is soil sleeping among the underclothes of the grass.'

What time is it now? I don't know.
Except that the spidery arms of the clock spin. Two flies circle
and buzz above, or three.
Poet, write a poem, and describe the scene
adding the wall upon which you were hung and the curtain
half torn under the lamp and the black window.
Do not forget to allude to Modernism so that you may be counted
among the pioneers, but before that, don't forget to describe the
scene
the old shoe resting alone under the clock as if
waiting for his owner's return, and beware of the big issues:
Poetry
must capture – not the things – but their crumbs.
And let your words rise to their covenant.

Owah!

The moon has fallen sad asleep
on his chair covered with clouds.
And the poet leaning on his stick accompanied
by his friend Jacques Berque
counted the moths that drowned in the clamour of flames
on that night,
the flames of candles lit
by children by the sea
who spend the night with foam
hunting the waves.

And evening in Beirut
was pining like a beggar soliciting in space
brought down to his knees
resting his cheek on Ulysses' cheek.
Do we think we are still alive by the shore of the Mediterranean,
have we become herders of the stars?

A rose carries the whole of night in her sleeves
leans on Beirut's chest
and gives her waist to the air's forearm
while life embraces her hatchlings
placing her feet on the staircase of the future.

Is this really the world?
Shall I grieve? Shall I hope?
I prefer to sing.

This poem has not appeared before in English translation. The Arabic original appeared in Tanbaa aiyuha al-aama (Prophecy, Blind One!), published by Dar al-Saqi (Beirut), 2003.

Raja Shehadeh

Excerpt from

Palestinian Walks: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape

From Chapter Four: Monasteries in the Desert

Wadi Qelt to Jericho

By the end of the nineties the future seemed to be only moving to bloodier times. This had been heralded by the increased rate of Israeli settlement and road building, the closing off of parts of the West Bank to Palestinians, settlers' attacks on Palestinian civilians and the brutal killings of civilians by Palestinian human bombers inside Israel. The brief respite that followed the first Intifada and the promise that prevailed during the first springs of the Oslo Accords, when each side watched the other with measured hope, soon passed and with it the freedom to roam freely the exquisite Wadi A'yn Faraa next to Wadi Qelt. It was essential not to hesitate but to venture out and take walks where it was still possible. And though most of upper Wadi Qelt, including the Faraa spring, was already closed to Palestinians, lower Wadi Qelt was still accessible.

The plan that Penny and I made with our friends Rema, Saba, another keen walker, his brother the doctor, and the brother's Russian wife, Maria, also a doctor, was to leave our cars in Ramallah, use public transport to Jericho and ask to be dropped halfway along the Jerusalem–Jericho road. From there we would walk down, passing by the old building which had once served as an inn for travellers on the ancient road between Jericho and Jerusalem. But the Israeli authorities were imposing another of those frequent sieges of Ramallah; the first obstacle was to be allowed out of Qalandia, the checkpoint separating Ramallah from Jerusalem.

There was a middle-aged soldier with a smiling face and round spectacles manning the post. He was too old to be a regular soldier and might have been a reservist, on duty in a dusty cubicle checking Palestinian identity cards. He first asked the doctor (who could enter because he had brought his medical identity card) to prove that the Russian woman next to him, who had forgotten to bring hers, was his wife. Then he decided that he couldn't let her pass.

'But why?' she objected. 'I'm a doctor and you're letting doctors through.'

'If I refuse to let you pass it would be a humanitarian problem. If I let you through I could be an accessory to murder,' the soldier proclaimed in his heavy accented English, looking pleased with himself, perhaps at being capable of such eloquence. Then he appeared to have another idea. He began to examine our friend's medical knowledge.

'Can you tell me where the sternum bone is?'

The Russian doctor looked askance at him. She seemed utterly baffled. Her light skin became pink, her long face seemed to grow longer and her eyes looked

vacantly at her husband as she tried to understand this soldier's English.

'I can't understand,' she told her husband in Russian. She had very poor English.

The husband turned to the soldier and answered his question.

'I know you are a doctor. I want her to answer.'

Then he hurled another question at her: 'What disease is caused by the Epstein-Barr virus?' he asked. Maria again looked confused while the husband tried to answer on behalf of his wife.

As this oral medical examination was taking place a whole line of people waited patiently, in silence. The rest of us also waited on the sidelines, too stunned, or perhaps fascinated, to intervene. The examination proceeded with Maria getting more embarrassed, on the verge of tears. She was desperately trying to decipher the questions of this middle-aged Israeli who spoke English in a strange accent. Meanwhile a Middle Eastern-looking soldier next to the round-faced one ordered all of us to go over to him. 'What's the problem?' he asked accusingly as if we were causing the delay. We told him that we were on our way to Jericho for a walk but his colleague had decided to conduct an examination of the medical knowledge of our friend the doctor. He turned and gave his colleague a patronizing look. He demanded we give him all the *hawieat* (identity cards). He put them together in one bundle, handed them back to us and let us pass, leaving the first soldier without the satisfaction of acting as a solo medical examination board.

After we passed the checkpoint I realized that I was seething with anger. Not at the soldier, but at myself. I, a lawyer, for many years a human rights activist, stood silently by and allowed this travesty to take place. More than any of the others who also stood by in silence I should have spoken up. What had happened to make me so passive that I made no attempt to stop the soldier from humiliating my friend? I was so grateful to the other soldier for saving us that I almost wanted to thank him. And what of the others? A motley crowd of Palestinians stood by as the soldier had fun at the expense of a respectable woman. Have we internalized defeat to this extent? Had this taken place before the Oslo Agreement I would have screamed at the soldier, demanded to see his superior, made it clear that he was exceeding his orders and made sure I put an end to my friend's ordeal. Instead we all stood by meekly, without so much as a whimper of protest and ended up feeling grateful just to have been allowed to pass. Perhaps it was time for me to leave.

My school friend Victor was amongst the first from my generation to decide that he would not be able to survive under the new regime. He had spent the best years of his life establishing a computer company under the most gruelling of circumstances, under the restrictions and obstructions of the Israeli occupation and the first Intifada. With the expectation of peace he had ambitious plans to expand his business regionally and had enough talented young people around him to manage this. One day he was called for a meeting along with other owners of computer companies to one of the Palestinian ministries that needed new software. They were asked to submit bids. He along with his staff worked day and night and produced the best offer. But they did not win the tender. A relative of the minister got it. This was a blow to Victor, who had pinned much of his hopes on this big job. This incident was followed by other depressing experiences of corruption and foul play. He sold programs to another ministry and did not get paid. He wondered how it was going to be possible to survive under the new regime.

One evening he came home from work and told his wife that the time had come for them to pack up and leave. They applied for emigration to Australia. They were both computer experts with money to invest. Their application was approved without difficulty. They had the brains, resources and skills. I visited them in their new country and found that they no longer bothered even to read the newspapers to learn what was happening here. They had made a complete break. And these were people who had been full of plans for developing the new Palestine. They had suffered the hardships of the first Intifada. They had ambitious schemes for outsourcing computer programs similar to those which helped Ireland and India revive their economies. All these plans had to be aborted because of short-sighted Palestinian officials drunk with power and determined to make quick gains. When I visited them in Australia, they seemed to have no regrets. Has my time to leave also arrived? Was the sumoud I had maintained for so long at an end?

We let the taxi drop us on the Jerusalem–Jericho road and scrambled down the mainly bare hills halfway between the two springs, Faraa and Qelt. We were going to start by walking upstream towards Faraa spring in upper Wadi Qelt, then wend our way back to the lower Wadi, visit St George's monastery, and continue to Jericho.

Wadi Qelt is a 25-kilometre-long *wadi* that has a greater abundance of water than most passable *wadis* in Palestine. The stream, which is strongest in winter, starts at A'yn Fawwar and empties into the River Jordan. When King Herod needed water for his winter palace in Jericho, he built the first aqueduct from A'yn Fawwar to Wadi Qelt. During Jordanian rule a new aqueduct was built along the same route. Because of the availability of water, pilgrims and would-be conquerors have used the valley as a route to Jerusalem, Damascus and even faraway Baghdad.

The better start for the Wadi Qelt walk, the spectacular ravine that cuts down to Jericho from the eastern Jerusalem hills, is at A'yn Faraa, one of the main springs that feeds into the *wadi*. But the last time I was able to begin the walk from there was in 1993. It was still possible then for Penny and me to drive through the hills around Jerusalem until we reached the Jewish settlement of Almon, which had been established at the foot of the spring, not far from the Palestinian village of Hizma on the Ramallah–Jericho road, eight kilometres northeast of Jerusalem. We would park the car at the settlement, lock it and without fear of being shot at begin the walk in upper Wadi Qelt. Indeed, a nature sign still points the way to the settlement's car park – but no Palestinian would now be allowed to approach its barricaded entrance. The route along this path through the *wadi* descends from 640 metres to about 100 metres below sea level at St George's monastery and ultimately to minus 258 at Jericho. It crosses three ecosystems. Because of the constant flow of water from the three springs, Faraa, Fawwar and Qelt, the valley is home to a great variety of wildlife including foxes, rock hyrax, lizards, porcupines and a great variety of birds: herons, falcons, kingfishers, eagles and ravens. The water in the *wadi* stream has frogs, crabs and fish.

We had no trouble finding the path. Once in the canyon we visited the remains of what is claimed to be the first monastery in the Jerusalem wilderness, founded by the third-century hermit St Chariton. In 275 Chariton was on a pilgrimage from Jerusalem when he was abducted by bandits and brought to a cave in the Faraa Valley. According to tradition, the bandits were killed by drinking wine poisoned

by a snake. After the miraculous death of his abductors, Chariton decided to stay in the cave as a hermit and was later buried nearby. Following a brief visit to the ruins we followed an old road to the British Mandate pumping station, surrounded by eucalyptus trees. Here was the beginning of the first-century bc aqueduct built by Herod which took water to the next spring, A'yn Fawwar, and from there to A'yn Qelt and on to the outskirts of Jericho.

The short walk down that meandering road brought us to the powerful A'yn Faraa spring. In the desert the contrast between the aridity of the surrounding area and the greenery in the Faraa Valley was striking, a reminder of the transformative power of water. It is at its most lush in late winter and early spring. By the middle of spring the wild flowers begin to dry up, much earlier than in the Ramallah hills, which are significantly higher.

Walking in this canyon we had the feeling of being in a large, deep basin with high rocks on both sides. That winter in 1993 the water had filled a section of the valley deep enough for a swim. It was a hot day but we decided against plunging in. Though we did not mention it we were both thinking of the murder of a Jewish settler in that same area by Bedouin boys a few months earlier. With her light-coloured hair and fair complexion, Penny would be indistinguishable from a settler.

When we first arrived at the deep section of the *wadi* after following the curve of the rocks, we saw a large heron fishing. When he heard us he slowly flapped his wide, unwieldy wings and reluctantly flew up. He perched on a high rock and waited for us to leave so that he could finish his meal. I was sorry that he felt the need to fly away on account of us. With the only sea close by being the Dead Sea, it was rare to see a bird fishing in our dry hills. I looked up at him and saw that on the rocks just above where he landed were Bedouin shepherd boys tending their flock of sheep. They too were watching us. I gave them a friendly wave. I didn't see them wave back. It was a tense walk during anxious times.

As soon as we left the taxi that brought us down close to Wadi Qelt we found ourselves almost running over the hills, which were like a brown tapestry. We felt euphoric. Being stuck in Ramallah, surrounded as it was with checkpoints at every exit, the experience of open space, with no walls, no barriers and a wide open sky, made us giddy with joy. We continued up the hillock until we came to a promontory where we could see the canyon stretched below and began our descent.

Our leader on this walk was Saba, hulking and dishevelled, shirt-tails out and trouser legs sweeping the ground. Early in the occupation, when he was still in his mid-teens, the Israeli authorities expelled his father to Jordan. He left behind his wife and two young sons. With the father gone Saba was forced to assume responsibility for the family. He resented the burden of having to act as a parent to his younger brothers. Though many years had passed he continued to feel bereavement over his stolen youth. To his friends he is one of the most faithful people I know. When he graduated from high school he left Ramallah and joined the Palestinian armed resistance in South Lebanon. He later spent time in Israeli prisons. But he still managed to pursue higher studies in history in Cairo and Paris. In his academic writings he showed the same boldness that he exhibited in life by writing about topics that others shied away from, like the issues of collaboration and Israeli massacres that remain undocumented. His views on the principal PLO

faction, Fatah, and its leader, Yasser Arafat, were revisionist. Though he made great strides in his academic career, that crucial absence of fatherly love and protection when he most needed them left him wounded, suffering a sense of inadequacy and a feeling of being underrated.

As we walked I observed how Saba approached the hills. I knew how much he loved walking in them and how he found himself in nature. But unlike me he never kept to the trail when one could be found. He clomped down over the terraces, causing stones to tumble and creating his own new paths. And when danger lurked it never deterred him. When we saw a pack of stray dogs ahead we were inclined to change direction. But not Saba. He marched right up to them and sent them packing.

But perhaps the biggest difference between the two of us was best exemplified by our respective responses to the second Intifada. For several months after it began I refused to recognize what was taking place. I continued to wish it away. Whereas he immediately thought it was bound to lead to our mass expulsion by Israel. For months and years he lived in fear of a second *Nakbeh*. Clearly his historical readings and personal experiences had worn him down.

The descent to the valley was quite steep. It was just the kind of walk Saba should lead for now there were no recognizable tracks that we could follow. We just scrambled down. In the water-filled canyon masses of the fragmite reeds were growing. We had been warned of water snakes, so we avoided walking in the water. Eventually we found the track by the southern side of the canyon and followed it towards A'yn Faraa. We were determined to go as far as we could and only turn back when it became absolutely necessary to avoid confronting the armed guards from the settlement of Almon.

In this section, the canyon was deep and narrow. The large boulder walls twisted and curved, forming small basins. We walked along the narrow path, negotiating our way around rocks, some of which were as precipitous and unfriendly as in Wadi El Daraj, until we reached a wider part of the valley which was sheltered on both sides by very high cliffs. Below, the water was thick with reeds and spearmint. Further upstream the canyon bent sharply. The part of the valley behind this blind corner was totally concealed. I thought it might have been the point at which Penny and I had stopped when we were approaching the valley from the direction of Wadi Faraa. We found a spot by a large carob tree and had our picnic. The water streamed below where we sat.

Then we heard noises. We looked up and, below the escarpment at the opposite side of the stream, saw a number of settlers approaching. We assumed they were from Almon coming down to visit their spring next to where they lived. They must have seen us as trespassers, potentially dangerous but perhaps, by the way we looked sitting there drinking coffee and eating our salads, not quite people on a military mission. One of the girls from the group approached Rema and asked her: 'Where are you from?'

Rema's answer was both straightforward and correct. She simply said: 'From here.'

(Profile, 2007 and Scribner, 2008)

Nancy Hawker

Scaping the Goat in the Old City of Jerusalem

The instructions were to 'meet at New Gate and then follow the goat'.

I looked for a goat and then found another woman who looked like she was looking for a goat. Together we found the gallery, tucked away in the little streets of Jerusalem's Old City.

Outside: crooked medieval alleyways, weather-worn white stone, arched entrances, dusty souvenir shops with wooden crosses, *menorahs* and postcards of the Dome of the Rock.

Outside, the actual Dome of the Rock shines just a few steps down at the end of the bazaar.

Outside, religious symbols crowd each other out: renovated synagogues and the Western Wall; Catholic Scouts and missionary schools; piles of shoes outside little one-room mosques.

Outside, *muezzins*, church bells and Sabbath sirens vie for the attentions of their constituencies

Outside, security cameras watch what the nearby soldiers cannot see, metal detectors beep and the guards patrolling the plaza outside the Wall poke around.

Inside, however, you could be forgiven for thinking you were attending a show at a trendy New York art gallery. Chicly dressed art connoisseurs, *intellectuels engagés*, sip wine and watch a film about Bethlehem by Ayreen Anastas that made the town seem strangely dead, forever in the heat of noon, encircled not only by the Separation Wall but by olive trees with uprooting orders nailed onto them by the Israeli army. One man whispered to me over his glass: 'We have to support these initiatives. We can't let the religious fanatics take the whole place.'

But we didn't stay in our cosy, artsy haven long.

Taking art out of museums and 'to the people' has been a concept and a rallying cry since the 1960s. In this latest, local version, the people of the Old City had video art, installations, photos and sound works interwoven into the city's patterns for ten days. They interacted in various ways, ranging from participating in the creation of the artwork; hosting and welcoming; refusing to cooperate; and destroying: much, probably, like 'the people' anywhere – in London, say, or Tokyo – but also in a rather Jerusalem-specific way.

Our smart group is going to observe, in the gathering dusk of this warm October day, these interactions *in situ*. The smartest of us all, the director of the project – Jack Persekian – shooed us out into the alleyway, then whooshed us down a flight of stairs and whizzed us through a passage, until we had only a very dim sense of our physical location. The gates of Heaven, perhaps?

We found ourselves, actually, in the offices of the Nidal Centre for Community

Development, which provides support for alienated youth. There was a video, and photos of and by the artist Desirée Palmen, in which she is barely distinguishable. She wears a camouflage suit that blends into the contours of that ubiquitous Jerusalem stone. She stands in front of the equally ubiquitous security cameras, completely still, with a cap on her head also painted a grubby pale brown-yellow with grey-black lines for the cement cracks. Many people pass her without noticing she is there.

Only one little boy in a school uniform takes a great interest in this breathing statue of cloth stones. Although the video is silent, we see him talking to Palmen, trying to elicit a reaction and then leaving in disappointment. A minute later he is back, fascinated and attracted; he looks at her, then at the camera, then waves his hand in her face. Still she stands. The boy complains, distressed, to a passerby, who simply shrugs. The little boy leaves but soon returns again, now determined. He motions to slap Palmen on her bottom, but stops his hand in mid-swing and smiles mischievously. He faces the security camera and tries to stand as motionlessly as she does. It records impassively. We watch the picture from its angle.

We are again whisked forward into the evening. In the old Turkish baths of Suq il-Qattanin, Naoko Takahashi's green, white and red balloons float at the domed ceilings. Only the colour black is missing – all together, these colours would make the Palestinian flag. The balloons seem to be trying to escape through the ventilation outlets, but are trapped by the roof. Some have fallen to the floor, defeated. The balloons transform the light in the rooms according to their coloured shades. The *hammam* complex is dilapidated; broken plaster grits under our feet. The festiveness of balloons seems incongruous, as though they lost their way going to a fair, and are therefore desperate to get out.

Next door are photos by Alban Biaussat of various objects in public places – a rubbish container, a gate, a lamppost – marked with the security tags used at Tel Aviv's airport. Once colour-coded, they are now numbered. Some luggage is of high-security concern – belonging, for instance, to Palestinians, or to young, single foreigners suspected of pro-Palestinian sentiment. Some luggage, such as that belonging to middle-aged Jewish American couples, is deemed harmless and tagged accordingly. The lamppost, especially, seems louche. How would it stand up at the airport officials' interrogation?

Security-tag stickers had been distributed by the artist inconspicuously in the Old City's public spaces, and had been peeled off moments after being applied. The place looks chaotic to the unknowing eye, but layers and divisions of competing forces order every inch of the surface. Who controls the gutter that was labelled with a red security tag? It could be anybody: local political groups, the Young Fatah Tanzim, the grandmothers of the neighbourhood, the Islamists in the mosques, the Jewish settlers or the Israeli soldiers. It definitely would not be the Bavarian tourists.

Khaled Hourani's placards proclaiming *Allah Mahabah* ('God is Love') suffered a similar fate. His simple notices mimicked the black-on-green plastic signs that have been popping up lately all over the Palestinian Territories admonishing believers to 'Remember God', 'Invoke the Mercy of God', etc. *Allah Mahabah* is a quote from an old song by Umm Kulthum, and it is also a well-known Christian saying. Few of the placards remained complete: most hang lopsided, with the *Mahabah* half cut out. Who had exercised censorship? And what is God, then, in these parts?

Up the hill we trotted, around the headquarters of Ateret Cohanim, the nationalist-religious settler organisation that buys up houses in the Muslim Quarter through undercover deals. The empty houses now sport large Israeli flags; the organisation believes that Arabs simply shouldn't be there. Did I just hear a dog bark in a manger? As the flags flap above our heads, we are invited into Café al-Haj Ahmad al-A'araj, where mint tea is served on tables with glass tops. Under the glass are aerial photos of different parts of Palestine, taken by Jean-Luc Vilmouth. Peering through the tea, we guess that this must be Gaza, and here is Hebron, and surely that isn't Nablus, and look at where we are standing, in the maze of the Old City, right here, and there, that's my house. Each table is an island with a sharp edge. Just add the checkpoints, the walls and the soldiers at each, and you are trapped in a little piece of Palestine. Add some sugar to your tea. And don't sell your house.

The title of the exhibition, 'The Jerusalem Show', intentionally evokes television programmes, maybe a variety show with a presenter in a glittering hat and purple suit, spreading his arms and booming: 'And now it's time ... for your favourite ... show of the week: *The ... Jerooooosalem Show!*' The red curtains would open and the parade would start, accompanied by a jingle possibly played by a brass band. In London's West End, it would be reworked fifty years later as *Jerusalem: The Opera*.

To make bearable the tragic events that are destroying the city's fabric, the visitor is invited to look upon them as a soap opera, a show, in which the tragic is hyperbolised for comic effect and which all ends with a laugh. The actors march by with preposterous speeches, ridiculous outfits and doomed acts. The laughs are bitter, not to say cynical, but not as bitter and cynical as reality. A modern art exhibition on and in Jerusalem can never, and can never try to, capture reality: it is a reflection, a representation and a partial picture. It is a show. The Jerusalem Show.

Jerusalem is not frivolous. The Arabic title of the exhibition gave the other side of the coin: *Ala l-Abwab il-Janna*: 'At the Gates of Heaven'. Jerusalem, its Old City in particular, awes the visitor. The heaviness of the place is due to its saturation with tensions, divergent meanings, prejudices and conflicts. One of the exhibition's projects was impossible to complete because the intended participants, who were from the African Muslim and Armenian Christian communities, were supposed to exchange visits. They had never mixed, though they lived side by side. But they refused. Sliman Mansour's portraits of the communities' members, titled 'Introducing the Other', had to remain in the gallery. The Armenian and African social clubs did not even host the pictures.

Jerusalem is also the locus of expectations and hopes. Religious Jews regard it as the launch pad for future redemption, while secular Israelis mingle with Christian pilgrims and tourists to admire the sites and shop at the markets when their stores are closed on Saturdays. Palestinians – Christian, Muslim and secular – regard the city as a precious and fragile treasure that they have had the coincidental historical honour of having handed into their custody. The exhibition's work was worthy of that guardianship.

The goat was stencilled onto the wall. It is the mascot of the al-Ma'mal Foundation, the organisers of the tour and exhibition.

Jerusalem's al-Ma'mal Foundation is a contemporary art gallery supporting and exhibiting Palestinian and international artists. See www.almamalfoundation.org.

Mai Yamani

Mecca: Islam's Cosmopolitan Heart

Mecca, the capital of all Muslims, is a focal point of pilgrimage (the annual *hajj*) and prayer. It is also a centre of cultural exchange, of mutual borrowing and peaceful coexistence of different groups. This cosmopolitan, open tradition was evident for more than 1,000 years until the forced annexation of Mecca – also the capital of the kingdom of the Hijaz – by the al-Saud rulers and their Wahhabi partners in 1932.

The Hijaz is the largest, most populated, and most culturally and religiously diverse region of the country, in large part because it was the traditional host area of all the pilgrims to Mecca, many of whom settled and intermarried there. The repression of the Hijaz, and of the Hijazi cultural model, immediately became the spearhead of Saudi-Wahhabi efforts to impose conformist orthodoxy on Muslims everywhere.

It is worth recalling what was lost. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, the Great Mosque in Mecca hosted the 'circles of knowledge', which provided a unique opportunity for dialogue between Muslims from different ethnic backgrounds and from all of the diverse branches of Islam. Central Asians, Indonesians, Malaysians, Indians, Persians, Egyptians, Turks – indeed, all those who represent the *umma*, the worldwide community of Muslims – came not only to perform the pilgrimage, but also as students and scholars in search of knowledge. Mecca was a place where Islam renewed and enriched itself.

The new Saudi-Wahhabi conquerors regarded this cultural and religious diversity as chaotic, degenerative and heretical, and set about resolutely enforcing their narrow vision of Islam in the name of national unity and religious purification. The political interests of the regime took precedence over the vitality of the *umma*. Indeed, the ultimate desire of the Saudi-Wahhabi leaders was to impose their drab, dogmatic politico-religious ideology on the Islamic world as a whole. Having conquered Mecca, the regime was confident that it could reshape Islam in its image.

The fissures in the stone

This outward-looking ambition was soon supplemented by a potent extra element that allowed the Saudi-Wahhabi ideology to become supercharged: oil money. *Madrasas* and mosques around the world, from Kosovo to Jakarta, received generous Saudi donations and became obedient to the strictures of Wahhabism. Soaring global demand for oil and a close relationship with the US appeared to set this ideological dominance in stone.

But events since the beginning of the twenty-first century have begun to fracture the stone. The attacks on the US in September 2001 identified Wahhabism

with nihilistic terrorism and unleashed America's wrath, often indiscriminate, on Muslim countries.

The US, of course, cloaked its military response with a high-minded purpose: the need to implant democracy, or 'freedom', in the Muslim Middle East. But the unintended outcome of America's frenetic assault has instead been the empowerment of Shi'i Muslims, as first the Sunni Taliban rulers fell in Afghanistan, followed by Saddam Hussein's Sunni regime in Iraq, where Shi'i allies of Iran now wield significant political influence. Iran's proxy in Lebanon, Hizbullah, achieved a crowning moment in this process with the effective defeat of Israel's objectives in the war of July–August 2006.

The once-powerful grip of the Sunni Saudi-Wahhabi regime's tentacles has been weakened internationally and domestically. Whereas Saudi Arabia, together with the Sunni regimes of Egypt and Jordan, initially criticised Hizbullah for triggering a war with Israel, this position soon became untenable as Lebanese civilians suffered and Hizbullah, despite heavy losses of men and military supplies, survived the Israeli onslaught. Indeed, Hizbullah's 'victory' has made it the vanguard of Islamic self-assertion, with the Wahhabis forced into the background, muttering sectarian complaints to which no one listens.

Paradoxically, Hizbullah's new stature throughout the Arab world suggests that, contrary to the conventional view, the politics of Islam cannot be understood solely in terms of the balance of power between Shi'i and Sunni. On the contrary: although cultural distinctiveness does still play an important role, the sectarian schism in the Muslim world is expressed far more by governments and guerrilla groups than at the popular level. The Saudi rulers won favour in Washington for opposing Hizbullah, but this counts for nothing. The Saudi-Wahhabi model of negative and sectarian politics, reflected in the condemnation of Hizbullah as Shi'i, has been washed away by the tide of Islamic opinion sweeping over the region and, indeed, the wider Muslim world.

The politics of al-Qa'ida stem from the original divisive discourse of Wahhabism. As a result, the change in the balance of power in the Muslim world has affected not only official Wahhabism, but also its deformed creation. Al-Qa'ida's uncontrolled violence and contradictory agenda, as seen in its sectarian war against the Shi'is in Iraq, has left it unable to build popular support. Whereas al-Qa'ida's rhetoric appeals only to angry and dispossessed Sunnis in Iraq and elsewhere, Hizbullah's more calculated and sophisticated model, according to which it operates as a political party, a military organisation and a social welfare provider, has managed to attract and unite the Arab street.

A return to the cradle

The perceived weakening of the Saudi-Wahhabi political system is leading to a release of pent-up social energies within the Saudi population, which could bring about unpredictable forms of activism. As the regime entrenches itself in its Wahhabist bastions and narrows the popular bases of its legitimacy, tendencies toward popular assertions of cultural distinctiveness have become more marked. Repression is no longer a guarantor of order, and legitimacy can be renewed only through the adoption of religious as well as political reforms.

In historic moments like the present one, new groups will emerge as the

old order dissolves. The repression of known traditional leadership facilitates the emergence of a new generation that is competitive and innovative. With Wahhabism weakened, the al-Sauds could seize the opportunity either to abandon it as the sole ideology of the state or to modify the ideology in order to render it compatible with acceptance of religious diversity in Saudi Arabia and beyond.

However one perceives the political strengthening of Hizbullah, its dramatically heightened stature suggests that the cosmopolitan tradition of Mecca resonates much more with Arabs and Muslims than the sectarian ideologies of their rulers. Perhaps this moment represents a call to Mecca, the capital of Islam, to renovate the open and inclusive tradition of the Hijaz. (I have explored this issue further in my book *Cradle of Islam: The Hijaz and the Quest for an Arabian Identity* [I. B. Tauris, 2004]).

The Saudi regime is presented with an opportunity to reclaim its leading position in the Muslim world by reinstating 'the circles of knowledge' in the Great Mosque and strengthening the position of Mecca. After all, the Saudi-Wahhabi rulers are a minority in their own country as well in the wider Muslim world. They need to move from a survival strategy and aspire to a role of genuine leadership. Restructuring the political and religious institutions of Saudi Arabia is essential if real diversity is to be accommodated.

Recovering lost traditions in Mecca will inevitably be linked to vital domestic change. Within Saudi Arabia, the *imams* of the mosques must become representative of the *umma*. The whole religious-educational system should be opened up to encompass all Islamic schools of thought, and a culture of tolerance and creativity. Having representative religious institutions will support local political representation such as regional governors, be they Hijazis in Mecca or Shi'is in the eastern region. The monopoly of al-Saud princes must cease. This does not mean that Mecca should become a political capital; rather, it should be a model of religious and cultural inclusion.

Meanwhile, the West must monitor developments in the 'cradle of Islam' closely and heed local calls for reform. Reformers who remain in jail or silenced must be heard. The West must encourage the al-Sauds to allow for freedom of expression and worship. It seems that both the West and the Muslim world at large have long forgotten or ignored Mecca's contribution to civilisation. It is time to remember, for the benefit of all.

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Jonathan Garfinkel

Excerpt from

Ambivalence: Crossing the Israel-Palestine Divide

From Chapter Fifteen

Perhaps my desire to take a tour was not well thought out. I don't make sound decisions when I'm hungover, and I'm wondering what I actually hope to achieve by crossing over to the other side. I want to say to Mohammad: I've never been to the West Bank. I don't want to end up like one of those mutilated Israeli soldiers lost in Ramallah. I'd rather not become a decapitated moron, a limbless news item. And besides, I promised my mother I wouldn't do anything dangerous on this trip. 'You had to wait until the fourth year of the intifada to make your first journey to the Holy Land? You have to go *now* of all times?' Mohammad looks at me, tilting his sunglasses down toward the end of his nose. 'Well? What are you waiting for?' he asks. I open the door and leave the car. Before I can even say *shukran*, he has reversed the Mercedes onto the highway and sped off south toward Jerusalem.

I walk through the maze of cars and people toward the checkpoint. Someone sells chai from a silver pot. At the checkpoint an Israeli flag proudly flaps above a mess of concrete, camouflage and barbed wire. Soldiers check cars and their occupants, slowly, slowly. There hasn't been a suicide bombing in two months, and tensions are supposedly low, making this one of the 'better' days at Qalandia. I pass tables with fake Levis, Kelvin Klein T-shirts, homemade orange pop. A tin roof-covered walkway marks the pedestrian passageway between the Occupied Territories and Israel, and I walk through with Palestinians. The Israeli soldiers don't ask for anyone's passport – who's going to bomb Ramallah? On the opposite side of the checkpoint people have stopped bothering to honk. *What's the point?* their eyes say. *Life is this waiting.* Behind the cars lies an open field of broken glass, blown-out tires and rusted metal. This junkyard home: the West Bank, prologue to a nation.

Amidst this rubble and chaos stands a man well over six feet in height with a completely shaved head, wearing a blue-and-white Reebok track suit with red vertical stripes. He spots me immediately and approaches to shake my hand. He smiles goofily.

'Fucking shit,' he says. 'Let's get the hell out of this mess.' I do not argue with the man they call 'Samer'.

The West Bank. Say its name and it conjures images of boys throwing stones at slightly older boys with guns that shoot rubber bullets, tear gas or grenades. American and Israeli flags doused in gasoline, an effigy of the West. Men wearing *kaffiyehs* spraying bullets straight into the air, mothers weeping for their martyred sons, coffins carried through the howling crowds.

Samer's Land Rover is equipped with white armour and bulletproof glass windows. In blue, he has pasted the word TV half a dozen times around the vehicle.

I feel at once reassured and nervous.

'Are we expecting snipers?' I half-joke as he opens the door for me.

He doesn't smile.

'This place is hell, my friend. Welcome. Can I smoke?'

I pull out a fresh pack of Lucky Strikes and offer him one.

'Finally. A fucking Canadian who smokes. Today is already full of miracles.'

I don't tell him I am new to the habit, that I only started smoking two days ago.

Cigarettes keep you sane, keep you breathing in the here and now. Samer pulls the Land Rover out of the mess that is Qalandia checkpoint. Soon enough the tour begins. 'This is the refugee camp,' he says, pointing to the ramshackle concrete disasters on our immediate right, 'and this is the settlement.' He points farther up the road toward a hill. The buildings are monotonously replicated row upon row; white stucco facade, cookie-cutter windows, red-shingled roofing. There is an eeriness to their architecture. The suburbs of North America have been transplanted into an occupied war zone.

'This road is the one the army uses to go from the settlement to start their shooting in the camp,' Samer says, pointing at a road that leads up a hillside.

'When does this happen?'

'Whenever they feel like it.'

We turn up the road and Samer parks the TV tank in front of the Muqata, Arafat's compound. Arafat's compound! We hang out with a couple of Palestinian soldiers who guard the inner gate to where Yasser and Company are holed up. Samer's the life of the party, cracking jokes, smoking cigarettes and high-fiving the guys. They know Samer because he's a cameraman who has been hired out by many North American TV networks, including CTV, CBC and NBC. If there's anything going on in the West Bank, he's there – Jenin, Hebron, Nablus – all the hot spots.

The compound is a ghastly collection of ruined buildings. Dangling rebar creates a surreal image: a frozen waterfall that might start to flow at any moment. Behind us, Palestinian Authority soldiers conduct feeble military exercises in the courtyard. They remind me of the Woody Allen film *Bananas*; the clothes don't quite fit, and I'm suspicious as to whether their guns actually function. Not that it matters. There is so little left to guard here. I have no idea what we're talking about, but I'm one of the guys. 'The Canadian Writer' is how Samer introduces me.

I excuse myself and head off in search of a bathroom, but discover the building that might have once housed a toilet has been blown to smithereens. I sidle up beside a broken wall and proceed to piss discreetly. Gazing up at Arafat's bunker, I spot a haggard face framed by a small window. The face wears – am I imagining this? – a black and white *kaffiyeh*. He looks down at me and sees my golden stream of urine. This makes him laugh. I quickly zip up my pants. Did I just see the *man* himself? That is, did Yasser Arafat just watch a Jewish tourist piss on his compound?

'Ramallah,' Samer explains as we get back into the Land Rover, 'is the paradise of the West Bank. It is quiet. Here there are no problems. Except at the compound.' I can't tell if he's serious or not. He lights up our cigarettes with a gold Zippo lighter. I ask him where he got it.

'At the store,' he says, annoyed by my question. As if they don't have stores

in the West Bank or Zippo lighters. We drive the main avenue of Ramallah, past a giant Coca-Cola sign and a Lipton Tea billboard. Adolescent boys wear Eminem shirts, sell black-market DVDs and Tweety Bird balloons. In the middle of the road there's a roundabout. Four white lions lie about in different poses. I figure they're some ancient symbol for the city. According to Samer, the Chinese government mysteriously delivered them as a gift during the days of Oslo in the mid-1990s. Nobody knows what they mean. When we stop at a café for lunch, I am embarrassed about the Zippo question. Sitting down on a plastic chair at a wooden table, ordering a Thai chicken sandwich with french fries, I realize I hadn't expected to encounter the normal in the West Bank. A sign for the Palestinian beer, Tabyeh, advertises 'on tap by the pint'. People sit, talk, read the newspaper, drink coffee. Scenes of ordinary life that aren't portrayed in the media, yet this is the banality that everyone dreams of – and fights for.

Samer and I discuss politics, sneaking in bites of food between arguments. He launches into his analysis: 'Freedom is a very complicated situation. You have to understand that's all we're asking for here.' When Samer talks, he looks you in the eye. His words sound weary from overuse – the same arguments for too many years. 'Before this intifada you could be sitting in your house drinking coffee and say, 'Let's go to Bethlehem,' and you could. Now you need special permission to cross with your own car. I have a friend who went from Bethlehem to Ramallah to cover a story. On the way in, the soldiers said it's okay, you go in, no problem. On the way back, he wasn't allowed to return to Bethlehem, where he lives, because he had a criminal record. It took him ten days just to get home. The bottom line is the power is out of our hands. Some soldiers are easy, some are strict. You don't know who you're going to encounter.'

I ask, 'What about the need for security, for Israel to defend itself against terrorist attacks? Doesn't Israel have a right to do this?'

'The justification is bullshit. It's about controlling a people and keeping them in one spot, isolated, helpless and dependent. Some days the Qalandia checkpoint is only open until seven at night. Other days it's until midnight. Or it's twenty-four hours. It's whatever they want. They make life impossibly unpredictable. We live with complete uncertainty.' Samer talks about the 700-plus kilometre 'security fence' that Israel is erecting around and through the West Bank. Israel justifies it as a means to discourage would-be suicide bombers from entering the country. Samer comments, 'If this wall was about security, they'd build it at the pre-'67 borders. Instead, Israel puts it in strategic places to get good farmland and more water. It's a land grab.'

I ask him if the average Palestinian supports suicide bombers. I mention the television images of families being honoured when their children choose to be martyrs.

'Listen, when you see a mother on TV saying I am so happy my son blew himself up, this is bullshit. She is saying this is something she supports in order to feel okay about the tragedy she has to live with.' I don't buy it.

'We made a film and interviewed the family of a bomber. The kid was brilliant. He was going to the university in Nablus and was thirteen days from graduation. The kid was top in his class, and the first in his family to be in the university. You think his parents were happy when he blew himself up? It took us two hours just

to calm them down so we could ask any questions. They live with an emptiness inside them. You can feel it when you walk into their house. Nobody wants this situation.'

We're headed into murky territory here. 'Why aren't more Palestinian intellectuals speaking out against the violence?' I ask. 'Where are the peaceful demonstrations?'

'The first intifada was something like this. It was rooted in the universities, and many students and intellectuals spoke up. Since then most of the intellectuals were either arrested or deported by Israel.' He dips a french fry into some ketchup and holds it in front of me like a teacher holds a ruler. 'You have to understand this intifada is different. Most Palestinians, myself included, don't support the suicide attacks. The bombings advance the political agendas of groups like Hamas. Some believe there is no other choice. The circumstances are terrible. We aren't allowed to leave the West Bank or Gaza and soon we won't be allowed to leave our own cities or villages. They are building a cage around us, this "separation fence". Think about it: people are blowing themselves up to get a country. It's the last act of a Shakespearean tragedy. It's shit man, total shit.'

Samer pauses, puts down the uneaten french fry, and opts for a Marlboro instead. He offers me one too. 'Look, I know you're a Jew. When you called me from that apartment in Jerusalem, I could tell from the numbers.' Samer lights up. Nobody is paying attention to us in the busy café. I shift in my seat. 'Am I going to kill you because of this?' He takes a long drag of his cigarette and stares me in the eyes. He exhales and starts to laugh.

'Fucking shit man, of course not. What matters is whether or not you're a good person. Which I think you might be.' He throws me his lighter and laughs some more. I feel like I've just passed through another checkpoint. The difference here is that once I have crossed this border with Samer there is hope for trust, the possibility of friendship.

After paying for my lunch Samer takes me to his apartment, which overlooks a valley where more construction is underway. In spite of the hopelessness of the situation, people are still building their futures. I try to imagine the house in West Jerusalem, and wonder if the Palestinian or the Jew takes care of it. What kind of shape are the walls in? Do Abu Dalo and Shimon fight over the small things, like where a plant should go, whether or not the music's too loud, if a room should have carpeting or hardwood floors?

At home, Samer speaks in a different tone, quieter, as he looks out into the valley. 'If I didn't believe in peace, I wouldn't be here with my family. It won't happen tomorrow. But when it does, it will be because Israelis and Palestinians have learned to see each other as human beings. As equals.'

Sitting with his wife and two daughters, we drink one pot after another of Arabic coffee. I think of Rana, her long fingers cradling a cracked cup at the Arab café in Toronto. While Samer and I sit contemplating the beautiful view and the apartments being built in the valley, we do our best to steer clear of the issue of our religions, beliefs and backgrounds. Life feels utterly fragile at this moment, too precious to pollute with ideology, politics and history. Samer takes his youngest girl, Sama, onto his lap. She laughs with her entire body, trembling with joy.

Still

I am pregnant with a Life
not yet born;
and the Death I have coupled with
claims her custody.

In this unclean bond with non-tomorrows,
I have surrendered
all my rights of Being;
and, saying 'yes'
to the frightful figure of Non-Being,
I have consented
to his blood-guardianship
of my unconceived Hopes:
to his cutting of their throats
for Honor's sake.

For
Death
demands a child of his own:
To him
Life
is an unwanted daughter
to be buried alive.

And I, having met the demands
for a body pure
and a mind impure,
still
pregnant with the Life
to be born into
the world of Non-Beings
– myself one of them,
should teach her:
to turn Non-Self;
should teach her:
to last;

I should teach Life to die:
to give Death a chance to live.

Still

I am pregnant with a Life
 that won't be mine after birth
 – a Life on whose birth certificate
 my name will not appear⁴
 even if
 I divorce Death.

Still

I am pregnant
 with unreleased screams:
 with unthought thoughts
 and undreamed dreams.

And I know

none will live
 unless they learn Non-Being!

And still I do not know

how to mother
 these children.

Yet,

after centuries of pregnancy,
 after the undying pain of birth
 in this Death-raising world,

I only know

I want my child to thrive:
 I want my Life
 alive.

1 Marriage vow in Iran

2 Blood-guardian: The father to whom, according to Iranian law, blood money should be paid; the parent who has the right to kill his offspring with impunity.

3 The custom of killing daughters by burying them alive among some Arab tribes was abolished by the Prophet Mohammad.

4 On Iranian birth certificates, only the mother's first name appears, and on the national ID cards issued recently, even this does not appear.

Yasmina Traboulsi

Extrait du roman

Amers

Chapitre I

Gabrielle s'engouffre dans le tunnel de Nahr el Kalb, passe le Christ Roi, sur les panneaux publicitaires trois films à l'affiche, peut-être iront-ils au cinéma vendredi. Elle traverse Jounieh, le téléphérique de Maameltein, les super night-clubs et leurs entraîneuses d'Europe de l'Est. Elle veille à ne pas rouler trop vite, elle craint les motards, sa voiture de fabrication allemande les provoque, encourage courses, slaloms et rodéos sur l'autoroute. Gabrielle fumerait bien, pas maintenant, le casino du Liban se précise, elle ralentit, s'engage dans le virage en direction d'Adma. Sur l'accélérateur, son pied nu glisse, la voiture recule, elle freine mais son pied moite glisse encore. La BMW dérape vers les rochers, une niche y abrite une Vierge ornée de fleurs, un camion MITSUBISHI fonce droit sur elle, ses phares géants l'éblouissent, des klaxons vocifèrent, Gabrielle hurle, ses pieds dansent sur les pédales, elle dégringole vers la vallée, la tôle l'emprisonne, les herbes sèches s'embrasent sur la colline, Adma pour bûcher, elle explose entre le pont et l'autoroute, des chardons envahiront plus tard la carcasse de sa berline.

Fausse frayeur. La voiture a heurté le pylône face à la pharmacie, l'airbag a amorti le choc, belle invention que le coussin gonflable de sécurité. L'ambulance ne devrait plus tarder, bientôt les sirènes, une femme en pleurs, des badauds, les pompiers l'évacuent, la police les précède pour dégager la voie, l'inquiétude se lit sur les visages, ils l'interneront à l'Hôtel Dieu, service des grands brûlés. Gabrielle s'acharne sur la portière, elle tente d'ouvrir, en vain, elle redouble d'efforts, ses mains tremblent, elle renonce. On joue de la musique quelque part, une mélodie d'ailleurs, sud-américaine, un rythme simple sans difficulté technique. Le néon de la pharmacie flashe à intervalles réguliers, elle fixe la croix verte fluorescente, la vitrine et les promotions, soldes sur les couches de marque étrangère, le paquet à 12 000 livres, moins de dix dollars. Une horloge indique neuf heures et dix minutes, Mirna sert à neuf heures trente précises, un bristol indique la place de chacun, les invités constateront son retard, son arrivée en solitaire, ils s'interrogent, émettent des hypothèses.

Gabrielle fouille la boîte à gants, renverse le contenu sur le siège passager, un bloc-notes, des comprimés pour le cœur, les papiers du véhicule et le manuel d'instructions. Elle trouve un sachet de lingettes encore neuves, arrache l'emballage, en saisit une grosse poignée, elle se rafraîchit la nuque, les tempes, les aisselles aussi, elle a beaucoup transpiré, sa robe est noire et sans manches, ça ne se verra pas. Elle se lève enfin, sa tête tourne, elle s'adosse à la portière, respire à plein poumons, expire par le ventre, un exercice de yoga appris récemment, elle doit se dominer, que ces tremblements cessent. Son talon saigne en abondance, le tapis de

gomme a élimé la chair, elle tamponne à l'aide d'une lingette, le coton se colore, un rouge vif, la blessure nécessite un pansement, il faudrait arracher ce morceau de peau qui frotte contre son escarpin. Le portable n'a pas vibré de l'après-midi, pas de message ni d'appels en absence, il ne viendra pas. Plus que deux kilomètres avant la zone orange, la rue 4 et la maison de Mirna. Après la LBC, les supermarchés de quartiers et la station essence, elle sera chez Mirna. Elle coupe le téléphone, il n'appellera plus.

Gabrielle démarre, la résidence de Mirna se dévoile au sommet de la colline, Omar le domestique soudanais offre du champagne, c'est sa sixième tournée. La musique tout à l'heure s'échappait de sa stéréo, un tango de Gardel, elle augmente le volume, fredonne, sa voix sonne faux, pourtant, comme de nombreux musiciens, elle a l'oreille absolue. Gardel l'agace, trop mièvre, elle préfère le jeu brut de Piazzolla, au retour, elle changera de CD, « Libertango », Piazzola au bandonéon, Yo Yo Ma et son violoncelle, un enregistrement exceptionnel. Là, elle arrive chez Mirna, Omar le Soudanais lui servira une vodka glace et des pistaches, elle oubliera l'incident du camion MITSUBISHI. Gabrielle est soulagée, Gabrielle s'est détendue, Gabrielle ne voit pas l'ombre qui traverse brusquement ses phares. Une secousse, un bruit sourd, comme un corps qui s'affaisse.

Chapitre II

La bonne s'appelle Gracia. J'ignore son âge, d'où elle vient. Je veux dire de quelle région des Philippines exactement. Elle a la peau brune, un visage aux émotions restreintes. Elle a pleuré, en octobre, après le meurtre de son frère pour une obscure affaire de dettes. J'ai pensé l'envoyer à Manille pour les funérailles mais Gracia m'est indispensable, je ne veux pas qu'elle s'éternise auprès des siens, qu'elle me quitte. Le deuil rend les femmes vulnérables, après tout, Gracia est une femme comme une autre.

La voilà. Elle m'attend devant l'ascenseur. Je me demande pourquoi. Son corps paraît tendu, plus rigide qu'à l'ordinaire, on dirait qu'il fait barrage.

– Qu'y a-t-il ?

Gracia parle peu. Elle maîtrise les rudiments indispensables à son métier, un français pauvre agrémenté d'anglais.

– Mam ... Mam ...

J'entre, Gracia m'inquiète, un cambriolage ? La maison saccagée ? Pourtant, Beyrouth est une ville sûre de ce côté-là.

– Gracia, je suis fatiguée, que se passe-t-il ?

Un courant d'air balaie l'appartement, les fenêtres claquent, le chaos de la ville résonne entre mes murs et m'assourdit. Gracia sait pourtant que je déteste l'agitation du dehors, spécialement le vendredi.

– Pourquoi as-tu laissé les fenêtres ainsi ?

Gracia me suit d'une manière étrange, elle n'a pris ni mon manteau ni les courses. Le sac plastique va céder, mes mains peinent sous le poids, les anses scient la chair, j'ai les doigts gourds, mes ongles trouent la paume, pourfendent les lignes de vie de petites encoches irrégulières. Dehors, des automobilistes s'insultent, ils exsudent la vulgarité. Je ferme les fenêtres à double vitrage et réclame un thé, un Earl Grey mordoré aux effluves de bergamote. La journée a été longue, nous devons encore sortir ce soir. Gracia pose le plateau sur la table basse au salon, il manque de

se renverser, Gracia a perdu sa belle assurance, elle tangué.

– Ça ne va pas ? Tu es souffrante ?

– No, Mam, répond-elle comme à regret.

Le thé est trop noir, elle a oublié l'eau chaude et les deux biscuits au raisin.

Je décide de ne pas relever.

– As-tu cassé quelque chose, abîmé un vêtement ? Ça arrive. Je ne dirai rien à Monsieur, sois tranquille.

Gracia garde le silence malgré mes efforts. Je marche dans la pièce, les derniers rayons du jour frappent les photos sur le piano de Téta¹ Rose, je ne distingue plus les visages chers, le soleil les efface un à un. Même Gracia s'évapore. Je m'assois sur la banquette face au clavier, empreintes et éraflures ont abîmé la laque noire. Gracia n'a pas conscience de ce que vaut un Steinway. Toi non plus d'ailleurs. Un objet a disparu, un objet familier, dans le salon, à l'entrée, je ne sais pas, je cherche, Gracia m'aveugle à se tenir ainsi, les bras ballants. Je la scrute en quête d'indices, elle se détourne, je n'ai pas besoin de son aide, cette maison m'appartient, ses meubles, ses bibelots aussi, Gracia l'a oublié, elle prend un mauvais pli, tu m'as prévenue. J'aurai dû t'écouter, sévir à l'occasion, je ne possède pas cette autorité naturelle dont tu fais preuve. J'avale une gorgée de thé, la boisson a tiédi, l'amertume se dépose sur ma langue, un goût rance, celui des feuilles tendres ébouillantées.

– La statue ...

Je cherche la statue, cette statue dont tu t'enorgueillis.

– Où est la statue ?

Tu arrives dans une demi-heure, tu tiens vraiment à cette statue primitive, un chef de tribu au nom imprononçable, une de tes trouvailles originales rapportée d'Océanie lors d'un reportage sur les Libanais d'Australie. Tu as profité de ce voyage pour visiter la Nouvelle Zélande, ton enthousiasme pour l'art maori étonnait. Tu me contais leurs légendes et croyances, le culte de la nature, tu rêvais de nous y installer, nous bâtirions une vie exempte de drames, bombes et déceptions, loin de cet Orient déliquescents. Je t'écoutais d'une oreille distraite, acquiesçais pour la forme, je ne croyais pas à tes mirages. Cette statue jurait dans le salon, ne cadrait pas avec mes meubles d'inspiration japonaise. Tu y tenais, j'ai cédé et l'ai placée à l'entrée. Il a fallu trois hommes pour le transporter, ton guerrier.

– Gracia, tu m'entends ? Où est la statue ?

J'évalue les possibilités, parviens à une évidence. Gracia ne l'a pas cassée, une statue pareille ne se casse pas. Elle ne l'a pas volée, Gracia ne vole pas. Je la loge, la nourris, la blanchis. Je la paie aussi. Trop selon la voisine qui m'accuse d'inciter sa bonne à la révolte. Je paie la mienne à ma guise, en retour, j'ai des exigences. Gracia ne s'est jamais plainte, non, elle n'a pas volé cette statue.

– T'es-tu absentée ? As-tu reçu quelqu'un ?

Gracia écarquille les yeux tant ma question la choque. Elle hausse les épaules, se retire, prétexte du travail en cuisine. Elle ment, je l'arrête, lui attrape un bras. J'ai envie de le lui tordre.

– Gracia. Réponds. Et vite s'il te plaît.

– Gone, il est parti, crache-t-elle enfin. De quoi parle-t-elle ? J'en ai assez de ces mystères et faux-fuyants, je la gifle.

– Gone, les livres aussi, ajoute-t-elle sans victoire, avec peine presque.

Chapitre III

L'entretien des voitures incombe à son mari mais aujourd'hui Gabrielle s'en charge, elle a inspecté l'avant de la BM, aucun dégât apparent cependant un avis professionnel la rassurerait. On lui a recommandé un Arménien qui ne posera aucune question. Trouver son garage dans les dédales de Bourj Hammoud relève d'une véritable gageure, elle circule rarement par ici, elle n'a pour repères que le fleuve Beyrouth, la rue d'Arménie et le cinéma Paradis. Un enfant finit par la guider jusqu'à Kiledjian, le héros du coin, un survivant de l'Aghed, la « Catastrophe » d'avril 1915, né en Anatolie, exilé à cinq ans, tout le quartier connaît sa tragique histoire. Les récits héroïques de l'enfant ne la rassurent pas, Kiledjian frôle les cent ans, elle ferait mieux de rebrousser chemin.

L'enfant se moque de sa mauvaise humeur, il l'abandonne face au garage, un sourire malicieux illumine son visage, l'étrangère incrédule l'a amusé. Un apprenti s'empare des clés, il appelle le patron pour l'inspection du véhicule, ils tournent autour de sa BM, l'apprenti suit docilement son maître, opine du chef, ils ergotent face au carburateur, un cirque bien rôdé, leur manège l'incommode. Gabrielle intervient, en arabe, juste une question, histoire de montrer qu'elle a une opinion sur le problème, elle explique l'impact sur le pare-chocs, la carrosserie à vérifier. Kiledjian grommelle, il tape sur le capot, fort, demain la voiture sera prête, une faveur avec la montagne de boulot, « filez, à demain après déjeuner ». Kiledjian l'escorte vers la sortie, il réprimande un livreur au passage, le téléphone sonne au fond sans interruption. Gabrielle n'a pas prévu de laisser son véhicule, ils n'ont pas établi de devis, elle n'a pas planifié sa journée sans voiture, elle n'a jamais pris de services,² l'idée la répugne, elle ne connaît pas le numéro d'Allo taxi, Gracia s'en charge d'ordinaire, le numéro figure sur la liste plastifiée qu'elle a tapée à la machine et qu'elles ont scotchée au mur, à la cuisine. Gabrielle cherche Kiledjian pour qu'il lui donne une estimation, il roule sur un chariot, examine les entrailles d'une Range Rover aux vitres fumées, il porte des bottes trouées au talon, des tâches d'huile de moteur maculent son bleu de travail. L'apprenti plaisante sur le mauvais caractère du boss, propose de la raccompagner, il a un dépannage rue Sami el Solh, il la déposera en chemin, il grimpe dans la camionnette, allons-y. Gabrielle indique une fausse adresse, deux rues avant, elle ne veut pas qu'il sache où elle habite, elle a perçu un drôle d'accent, l'apprenti n'est pas d'ici, encore un de ces réfugiés irakiens, elle fouille son sac, chausse ses lunettes de soleil, feuillette son calepin, elle note un rendez-vous fictif, la voiture n'avance pas, ils sont coincés sur l'autoroute, un car de ramassage scolaire lui bouche la vue. Petite, elle prenait le même, blanc à rayures rouges, « hurry, hurry, autocar is coming » la pressait la bonne dès l'aurore. Gabrielle montait la première et descendait la dernière après avoir sillonné la ville de long en large. Gabrielle voulait rentrer, Gabrielle voulait jouer. « Autocar » devrait de précieuses heures avec ses poupées, ses rêves et le piano de Téta Rose. Elle détestait « autocar », ses rayures horizontales, ses sièges en cuir bourrés de mousse, les miettes du goûter qui piquaient ses cuisses, les vitres grasses des mains, des nez, des bouches que ses camarades collaient pour rigoler ou parce qu'épuisés après les classes et la cour de récré ils s'effondraient contre la vitre opaque des miasmes de l'enfance. L'apprenti met la radio, une station pour jeunes avec rap américain, ces rythmes saccadés l'insupportent, elle n'ose pas changer de chaîne, l'apprenti lui rend service, elle ne va pas en plus se plaindre. Elle compte

les vignettes sur le pare-brise, les publicités qui jalonnent l'autoroute, campagne d'ampleur pour les charcuteries La Piara. Chaque cinq mètres, un panneau géant avec mortadelle aux olives, jambon cru, jambon cuit en fines lamelles, de quoi déguster la plus carnivore des ménagères. L'apprenti se présente, il profite de la minute infos pour parler, il s'appelle Wafic, vient de Syrie. Gabrielle a eu raison de se méfier, les Syriens espionnent, celui-là aussi, les camelots, les ouvriers, les serveurs, les militaires, ils espionnent, tous, sans exception. Elle élude ses questions, l'interroge à son tour, mieux vaut rester prudente, surtout en ce moment, les Syriens plient bagages, ils ont jusqu'à la fin du mois pour foutre le camp, celui-là a trouvé une planque, il compte rester, s'installer à vie.

L'apprenti est volubile, l'intérêt de la dame le flatte, il explique, ses études, les cours du soir, il trime pour se les payer, la mécanique d'abord, l'ingénierie ensuite. Son diplôme en poche, il s'installera à son compte, s'occupera des frères restés au pays, ses sœurs aussi souligne-t-il, il paiera pour elles comme pour les frères. Un Syrien qui étudie à Beyrouth, une nouveauté, on ne lui avait jamais fait le coup de l'étudiant, une couverture peu crédible, son instinct l'a sauvée, il n'aura pas son adresse, aucune information à signaler dans son rapport aux services de sécurité. Son chef le punira, une sanction assortie d'un blâme, il le rétrogradera, il finira planton à la frontière. Le portable vibre au fond du sac, le numéro de Mirna s'affiche, Mirna attendra. C'est à cause de son invitation que l'accident est arrivé.

1 Grand-mère.

2 Taxi populaire collectif.

(Mercuré de France, 2007)

Mai Ghoussoub

Excerpt from the collection Selected Writings

Lebanon: Slices of Life

Driving with Rida

Rida is a character that only Martin Scorsese or John Updike could have created. But Rida is not a fictional creation; he is a Lebanese driver and he is very real. As he takes me through the messy roads of Beirut, Rida complains. He scorns the other drivers and those who allow them to carry a driving licence, he protests about the cost of living, he curses the government. His diatribes always end with the same conclusion: 'Our politicians are thieves and if we were in a civilised country, they'd all have been hanged by now'.

Rida is from the south of Lebanon and lives in the *dahiya* (southern suburbs) of Beirut. For me, he is a great source to catch the mood in Lebanon, and despite the repetitions, whenever I sit in his car, I do my best to trigger a conversation by asking: 'What do you think will happen to us in this country?'

I know that before elaborating he will confirm to me that nothing good is to be expected. This time I ask Rida where he escaped with his family during the Israeli invasion and what he thinks about the resistance movement. Tales of heroism start to pour from the driver's mouth.

'We taught Israel a lesson; every person was ready to sacrifice their life, *fida* Sayyid Nasrallah.' (*Fida* means 'giving one's life for'.)

'But Rida,' I ask, 'what happened to your home?'

As the traffic thickens and the hold-ups increase (another byproduct of the disappearance of bridges in the country), Rida's frustration rises to a crescendo.

'I don't know what all this was for. When you have a criminal neighbour like Israel, you should think a hundred times before provoking it. Hizbullah should have known better – what heroism is there in creating a million refugees? Believe me, *sitna* ('dear lady'), if they had not distributed compensation money to the people who had their homes destroyed, they would have been spat upon by all the Shi'i population.'

I didn't suggest to Rida that this was an exaggeration, for Rida always exaggerates. I didn't tell him that within five minutes he had confidently expressed two directly opposing positions. I didn't tell him that because, after a few days in Lebanon, I had realised that many people proclaim completely contradictory views within a short conversation. People's identifications and convictions are dual, if not multiple, and after the war they all speak and behave as if they had survived an earthquake or some traumatic natural disaster.

Rida's wife has decided to wear a veil, he says with a slightly proud smile, even though he has never asked her to do so. He also tells me a joke that is circulating in Lebanon: he displays the V sign using his index and his middle finger and asks,

‘What does this mean?’, immediately answering: ‘There are only two buildings left.’ After successive destructive wars, the Lebanese are masters of black humour.

The second day I asked Rida to drive me to the mountains in the Metn, a Maronite (Christian) area north of Beirut. It was Saturday 14 October, and General Michel Aoun, the Christian ally of Hizbullah, had called for a big rally the next day. His aim was to display his ability to mobilise the masses, both Christian and Shi’i, and ultimately to become the president of the republic (in the event, heavy rainfall forced the rally’s abandonment). Again, jokes are running fast among Lebanese Christians, which reflect the political atmosphere better than any analysis.

One goes like this: General Aoun calls his aide and asks him to prepare 200 sandwiches for the people at the rally. His aide says: ‘But General, we are expecting 200,000 demonstrators – why only 200 sandwiches?’ ‘Because all the others are fasting for Ramadan,’ says the general (meaning that the masses Aoun can mobilise are actually the masses Hizbullah will mobilise for him).

When we reach Antelias, we see in this Christian enclave next to General Aoun a sea of orange flags and a huge Hizbullah banner hanging in the middle of the place. I look at Rida’s face and see it beaming with pleasure. When I ask him why he is so pleased, he replies: ‘It is nice to see us featured in this area.’

‘Us?’ I ask. You have been complaining about Hizbullah and its adventurous attack and its responsibility for all the misery of the Shi’i population all through the trip from Beirut to Antelias! I don’t understand.’

‘Well,’ he says, ‘who would have dreamed of seeing a Shi’i party celebrated in this area!’

That is why it is great to speak to Rida. He is representative of all the contradictory identities of the Lebanese, their variegated belonging to their nation, community and individuality. Rida complains about all his affiliations, but ‘affiliated’ he nonetheless is.

On the terrace

It is still hot in Beirut in early October. When I visit Nada and Samir, I ask to have our drink on the balcony. They live in West Beirut, in a traditionally Sunni area that is now Shi’i as well. It is Ramadan, but the supermarket down the road still sells me a bottle of wine that we intend to enjoy on their terrace. Other friends join us. The *Husseiniya* (Shi’i mosque) next door has a powerful loudspeaker, and the *sheikh* starts his prayers. My host complains: ‘Each evening during Ramadan we have to endure listening to this monotonous chanting for two or three hours! This shouldn’t be permitted.’

His wife says that at least they could have selected a *sheikh* with a better voice. The other guests start to tell stories about how it is becoming impossible to complain about the zealots who are overextending the prayers and overusing the capacity of the loudspeakers. Samir goes inside and puts some *tarab* (Arabic blues) in his CD player. We end up discussing politics, the ‘terrible situation’ and exchanging the latest jokes in the midst of a musical cacophony.

My friends are secular and all complain about the ascending power of the religious groups in the country. Muhammad, a university teacher, disagrees with them all: ‘I was against Hizbullah and its attack, but once Israel attacked I supported the resistance. Now I am happy the international forces are here, for

what would happen to us secular Muslims if we were left with a triumphant and omnipresent Hizbullah?’

I listen quietly for once and remind them that they can still drink their whiskey quite comfortably in the middle of Ramadan and that this is possible because Lebanon is still holding it together as a country.

Another terrace, in East Beirut this time. A beautiful view of the city can be seen from the terrace of Zeina, a fashion designer. She receives her customers in her home, and always invites them to enjoy the sight from her terrace before displaying her latest designs; her customers are always seduced by the panoramic view of Beirut. But today Zeina isn’t smiling back with pride when we compliment her on her location.

‘I can’t sleep any longer,’ she says, ‘A new nightclub opened a few weeks ago, and even if I close all the windows, the pop music and the synthesisers assault my eardrums till 4 AM every morning. I’ve been complaining every day to the owner and to the *gendarmerie*, but to no avail. They are *not* going to kick me out of my flat.’ We all sympathise, but know quite well that she has no chance of winning her battle. The nightclub owners are very generous towards the police and the heads of local *gendarmeries*. Even though she runs a successful business, and even if she was willing to bribe a policeman, she’d never be able to compete with the most successful businesses in Lebanon: restaurants and nightclubs.

I look at her designs and remember my evening at Nada and Samir’s. From West to East Beirut, people with balconies are complaining about noise. Does it matter if the source is religious or secular? Does it matter if its source is the throat of a *sheikh* or the strings of an electric guitar? In Lebanon, sadly, it sometimes does!

Cultural scenes

At an art gallery that was not deterred by the dangers of war, two young women defy the depressive mood of the Lebanese intelligentsia and its curators and organise an exhibition of art created during the war. It is small, simple, but very touching. Installations, collages, sculptures and video art speak of the war between Hizbullah and Israel or, more accurately, of the artists’ concerns during the war. I spent more than an hour browsing through the gallery, always returning and stopping, intrigued, in front of an installation called ‘A House that Anne Frank Did Not Live In, and Books She Did not Write’.

The artist is from the South, and has piled all the remains of his torn and burned books on the floor of the gallery; an Israeli bomb had fallen on his home, turning it into rubble.

Why this title? Is he saying that the Israelis are doing to us what the Nazis did to the Jews? Is he complaining that we are suffering like Anne Frank, but that our suffering is not recognised? The books he had in his home speak of the latest artistic tendencies exhibited in museums all over the world. The artist is obviously connected; so is Lebanon, after all. Will this stay true? This time I felt a sort of tiredness among the Lebanese, a deep sense of desperation.

‘Don’t tell us that we Lebanese always get back on our feet. We don’t want to have to always rebuild, we’re fed up of having initiative,’ said Najwa to a journalist who was trying to be supportive.

Many of the artworks are ironic. Black humour again. On the way out of the

gallery I feel better, somehow stronger. But art always does this to me.

Al-Wilaya is Hizbullah's official group of singers and musicians. They are performing everywhere and, were it not for piracy (according to the studio owner in a southern suburb), they would have sold millions of recordings of their latest CD, rather than just half a million.

Listen to their lead singer: 'We use drums, synthesisers, trumpets, clarinets, but not tambourines or *derboukas* [drums]. These encourage dance. They [meaning "the West", I guess] think we are ignorant and backward, but we are cultured. We love life, music and art. We don't just live for martyrdom and death. But we want to live with dignity and pride.'

The problem is that synthesisers are not exactly authentic Arab or Islamic musical instruments, while the *derbouka* is. But in any case, I believe that Islamic movements nowadays are an expression of postmodernity and not at all a recurrence of things past. The word 'fundamentalist' is misleading.

When I am ready to face it, Hassan takes me to the southern suburbs. They are lively again. Many young people are walking back from school, avoiding the piles of rubble and the holes left by the Israeli bombs. Not all the women are veiled. Many are wearing tight jeans and showing off their stylish coiffures. Anger and sadness compete inside me to the point of nausea. How could anybody do this to a heavily populated area? I had seen the pictures on TV, but none of them had shown the dresses or the blouses or the toys still caught in the piles of concrete that were people's homes. Hassan had his home bombed but is still living in it, avoiding the hole in the middle of his son's bedroom.

'Why are you living in your home, still?' I ask him. 'You can rent a flat away from the *dahiya* until you renovate yours.'

'I want to be home. I am used to it here, this is my neighbourhood.'

Hassan came to the *dahiya* after being evicted from the flat he had occupied downtown (which he had moved into when he lost his home during an earlier war). I remember the Palestinians, who felt nostalgic for their camps when they were obliged to leave Lebanon. Home is where you have built habits; old traditions are often quite recent.

One building is cut in half, revealing a display of white wedding dresses. The shop is trying to do business, as if to prove that life is made of celebrations and funerals. A hairdressing salon advertises with a sign made from a Fernando Botero painting, next to a shop selling clothes for the *muhajjabat* (veiled women). On every corner there is a large poster celebrating the 'divine victory'. I had the feeling I was walking through a sad, bizarre Salvador Dalí painting.

To the south, but food first ...

Before heading south I visit Souk al-Tayeb. It is Saturday, and Kamal is still refusing to be defeated by the war. Kamal is a sweet, elegant and generous person who loves food and takes pleasure in all things culinary. When I meet him in Souk al-Tayeb, the organic heaven he has created, he kisses me and says: 'Don't leave this country. Look at all these displays of wonderful food that people have brought here.'

I look around and see an enormous variety of homemade products being cooked or sold in this picturesque *souk* in the middle of the Solidere area. Kamal

is also trying to celebrate Lebanese apples, as the agricultural sector has suffered huge losses from chemical damage to crops, and from the cluster bombs that have killed more than twenty children since the war ended and left farmers too afraid to pick their crops.

The Lebanese are obsessive about good cuisine. They discuss and taste dishes endlessly. Within half an hour in the *souk* I tasted two delicious sweets that I had never previously encountered or even heard of. I learn that Kamal had also organised Souk al-Tuffah (a *souk* for apples), and a competition for new recipes using apples. The winner had invented a wonderful dish of vine leaves stuffed with apples. One thing is sure: the glorious food tradition of the Lebanese has not been beaten by this bloody war. It is still feverishly alive.

Nabil and Samia pick me up for the journey to the south of Lebanon. The road will be long, much longer than usual, as there are no bridges left thanks to the Israelis' hateful attack. I am furious at the sight and scale of the destruction. Nabil cheers me up with another input of black humour. During the war, he hired a taxi to take him to Sidon to bring his mother to Beirut. Approaching a bridge, the taxi driver (who had already charged Nabil ten times the normal price) asks: 'Sir, would you rather die under the bridge or over it?'

(Saqi, 2008)

Ali Alizadeh

Attar

for Ken Avery

What worth, the life of a rogue, always drunk
on lees, the bitter residue in the pit of the wine urn
in the tavern, in the valley of the ruined. What
a waste to squander a sack of coins on such a man
who can't grasp the comfort of religion, the charm
of a court poet's fame; and never cared to converse
with the *emirs'* beauties on the harems' peripheries.
The Mongol's cutlass pauses on the captive's throat
to consider the ransom. Why such a rotund bag
of coins for a dusty recluse whose loose turban is
a cheap, coarse scarf? Why is he called 'Drug-maker'
– *Attar* – when his renown as a poet could've
freed him from the chores of brewing medicine? He
could've earned a mansion and a retinue of slick steeds
by composing frivolous sycophantic odes for the Shah
of Persia or the Sultan of Baghdad. Instead he remained
an impoverished healer in Nishapur, besieged, now
sacked by Genghis Khan's hordes. A hapless captive
to the mystical deviance of dervishes; Sufi heretic, foe
to his people's cherished dogma, author of the eminent
epic that renounces the self, celebrates Annihilation
in the name of Love for the Beloved. The Mongol's blade

releases his skin as the coins are ogled, the captor smirks. But the Drug-maker doesn't rise to his feet; the alleys of his city are zigzagged by rivulets of blood. A pyramid of skulls looms over the smouldering hovels and crumbling mosque. He laughs, mumbles to his subjugator: 'Fool, they've cheated you. I'm worth much more than a bag of gold.'

The warrior glares, grunts an Asiatic curse. The Elder continues: 'I am indeed worth a bag of straws. A fat, bulky sack of straws.' The mocked invader huffs, unleashes his sabre. Blood fountains: the Master's head tumbles and rolls.

Malu Halasa

Excerpt from the novel

Mother of All Pigs

As abruptly as they had arrived, the Sheikh and his followers filed out of the butcher shop. Husayn was gripped by conflicting emotions. His face burned with anger, but his blush also contained elements of embarrassment and guilt. He resented being pressured into doing something he did not believe in; at the same time, his conscience would not allow him to feel at ease with what he had done.

He wondered why the Muslims bothered with him at all. It was true that many people came to his shop and he had always assumed they were Christians – but perhaps he had been wrong. The numbers alone should have told him. There were not enough Christians to account for the vast amount of pork he sold. The Sheikh's fury was not solely about the sale of pig meat; it was that in some homes it was actually being *eaten*.

From the moment his uncle Abu Zahtar had shown him the pig, Husayn suspected trouble ahead, but had not really thought beyond the first litter, and assumed that the piglets would be fattened up for a one-off bonanza sale, then the business would end. He had not considered the pigs' natural instincts. No sooner were the young boars weaned than they acquired the mounting reflex. They exercised their natural skills on their mother, then with each other and finally turned their attention to their own sisters. Husayn had watched them, and began to ask himself whether there might be more to the project than he had thought.

He knew castration was the best way to ensure that the boars fattened up properly, but decided to spare two of them from the knife. He left this fortunate pair with their enormous mother, Umm al-Khanaazeer, and five of their sisters, and moved the other thirteen piglets into a different pen. The young boars mated with an uninhibited libidinous indulgence, revelling in their thirteen-minute orgasms. Fascinated, Husayn timed them on a fancy Taiwanese stopwatch, accurate to one-tenth of a second, which he had borrowed from Abu Zahtar. The experiment paid off. By the end of the fifth month, when the rest of the litter was ready for market, Umm al-Khanaazeer and three of her daughters were pregnant.

It was at this point that Husayn discovered that he did not have the heart to kill them. It was strange that the son of a farmer, accustomed from an early age to the necessities of slaughtering animals, should be so squeamish; stranger still that the former soldier, who had proven capable of taking a human life, should be unable to butcher a pig. He had developed an affection for the creatures, based on respect for their intelligence. He realized it would be impossible for him to carry out a vital part of his uncle's business plan. There was no question of going to Abu Zahtar for help; the old man would not have understood.

For several days Husayn tried unsuccessfully to think of someone he could

safely approach with his problem. Then he hit upon the idea of asking the people who had rented his father's old house. He had been obliged to override strenuous objections from Leila when he originally let the building to the family from the refugee camp. After much argument, his wife had at last dutifully agreed to his decision, but could never fully understand why he charged so little rent or why, when there was a surplus at the butcher shop, he took gifts of meat to his tenants. For Husayn, it was more than simple charity. By using the house to benefit the less fortunate, he hoped to atone for selling off his father's land. He was pleased that the answer might lie in an unexpected byproduct of his kindness.

The head of the family, a man of about fifty, was more than willing to slaughter the pigs for a small remuneration. In this way Husayn took on his first employee, and Akmet proved a capable worker. Nine months and a hundred piglets later, there was more to do than ever before. The retail side of the business was growing, and it looked as though Abu Zahtar's prediction of easy wealth had not been unfounded.

There remained, however, another apparently insurmountable problem. Husayn scrupulously examined each new litter. He measured each piglet's weight and size, inspected hooves and tails and checked eyes. So far he had been lucky, but knew his chances of producing another generation without some evidence of inbreeding were very slight. Then, as Leila put it: 'Who would want to eat a pig with six feet and two heads?' The gold mine would have closed prematurely – but for Abu Zahtar's intervention.

His uncle had, from the beginning, made numerous contributions. He had provided, at only a fraction above cost, feed; antibiotics; a large, rather noisy freezer; even an electric prod that Husayn never used. But the solution he devised totally eclipsed his previous efforts: through his cross-border contacts, Abu Zahtar managed to locate a supply of frozen boar semen. Husayn had not been too keen on the idea; there was something unnatural about it that sickened him.

When the first consignment arrived late one night on a Damascus-bound truck, Husayn's misgivings multiplied. Both the label on the box, which contained the vials of sperm and the instruction booklet inside were written in Hebrew. He should not have been surprised: the religious prohibition against pork on the other side of the Jordan did not prevent it from being marketed as 'white meat' and selling well. The mere idea of artificial insemination would be outrageous enough for many of his neighbours. If the source of his latest secret was to become known, then everything he had worked for – his home, his business and his family – could be reduced to ashes.

Abu Zahtar was, of course, thrilled by the prospect of such technological innovation. He studied the thermometer and other equipment with great enthusiasm and pored over the instructions, displaying a knowledge of Hebrew that shocked Husayn. Abu Zahtar, assembling the catheter, airily brushed aside his nephew's fears: 'What's good for pigs is good for politics.'

Bolstered by his uncle's confidence, Husayn reluctantly agreed to give the procedure a try. They restricted themselves to working on Umm al-Khanaazeer until the method was perfected. The first two attempts were not successful, but by carefully monitoring the signs – a certain redness around the genitals in the presence of one of the boars, a rise in body temperature – Husayn was able to

choose an opportune moment for the third attempt. The resulting litter was small, eight piglets, but it was clear that the introduction of new blood far outweighed the temporary slowdown. As the frequency and the number in each litter multiplied, Husayn had felt a corresponding growth in respect and gratitude to the venerable matriarch who was responsible for the whole rapidly expanding clan. When he was alone in the pig shed he would scratch behind her ear with a broken saucer, whispering her name: 'Umm al-Khanaazeer', Mother of All Pigs, and tell her how she alone had brought them luck.

Production soon outpaced demand. This troubled Abu Zahtar, who hated to see waste – particularly if there was a way of turning it into profit. The freezer he had supplied was not large enough to contain the surplus, and the cost of running the generator proved to be unnervingly high. So the old man urged his nephew to find some other way of preserving the meat. He was able to describe the unwholesome delights of bacon, sausage and ham, but could offer very little practical advice on methods of preparation. His only suggestion was to visit the library in Amman.

The library had been founded by the British Brigadier General 'Pasha' McNeally, KCB, CMG, DSO, OBE and MC, a former favourite of the King who had been forced to return to England following a series of astounding inept military defeats. He had not been given enough time to pack a bag, let alone his books, which unlike their owner had been provided with a permanent home. The general's collection covered a wide range of esoteric subjects, and Husayn was able to borrow a slim, seldom-studied volume that the sceptical librarian had assured him contained the knowledge he needed.

Although many of the English words were unfamiliar, it soon became clear that heat treatment would be out of the question. It would never be possible to generate the high temperatures needed to insure against the unpronounceable and unpleasant-sounding dangers of trichinosis. The next section seemed more promising. Sticking closely to the recipe, a carefully selected leg was soaked in strong brine and then subjected to several prolonged applications of salt, sugar, nitrate, pepper and spices. The meat was then left to dry in the sun. Within days it assumed the appearance of ancient, hardened candle wax. Abu Zahtar wanted to feed it to the pigs – after all, it represented a significant investment in condiments alone – but Husayn threw it away behind some rocks and returned to the book.

The final chapter was devoted to smoking techniques. Husayn built a small hut out of old, corrugated tin and sent Akmet to comb the countryside in search of fuel. The book recommended oak and beech as woods guaranteed to impart a golden glow, but the assortment of bush and scrub they managed to scrap together gave the meat an unhealthy blue-grey tinge and made it taste bitter. Husayn was prepared to give up altogether, but Abu Zahtar would not hear of it. Through his ubiquitous contacts, he learned of an olive grove in Occupied Palestine that was about to be destroyed to make way for a new settlement. He procured a lorry-load of wood and, at his own expense, arranged for it to be transported to the farm. Husayn protested about the political implications, but his uncle was unimpressed.

'Surely Grandfather must have told you about the olive tree,' he said. 'Each leaf bears *Bismillah al-rahman al-rahim*, "In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful". If the trees do not pray five times a day, God forsakes them, and their fate is to be cut down. Is it my fault this was an impudent grove?'

Husayn let the gnarled branches weather outdoors to reduce the tannin in the bark, then carefully built a fire in his smokehouse. At last, he was rewarded. The meat tasted of thyme and black olives, a rich mellow flavour that became instantly popular with his customers. However, consignments of wood arrived too infrequently for smoking to be economically viable. One man provided his own juniper twigs and berries, from which Husayn made a perfectly acceptable Westphalian-style ham, but to carry on producing a commercial product he was forced to go back to boiling. With trial and error he developed a satisfactory method of coating the cooked joints with honey and aniseed. These hams sold well, but Husayn was not as satisfied with the texture of the boiled as with the smoked variety. So he was pleased that Abu Zahtar was able to arrange for most of the farm's output to be exported – but made a point of never asking the destination. If frozen boar sperm and olive wood could cross the Jordan in one direction, there was no reason a cargo of hams couldn't go in the other. He just didn't want to know.

Seduced by the money he was making, it was easy for Husayn to believe he was becoming the success he had always wanted to be, and there was always plenty of work to keep him occupied, particularly after Abu Zahtar provided the final confirmation of his cheerful dictum that there was a use 'for every part of the little piggy'. The old man had obtained an ancient German Würstmeister from his Palestinian goods-and-services man.

The sausage machine was a thing of baroque beauty. Pipes, bowls, pistons, mixers, drums, shakers, grips and pots exuded a futuristic, functional elegance. The power unit looked like it could drive a small car, and when the machine was working it shook and rattled alarmingly. But it performed its task with flawless efficiency. Brain and brawn, ears and jowls, lungs, trimmings: Husayn's failed hams were placed in a large hopper above the primary grinding assembly. The ground meat was further chopped by a rotating blade, then transferred to the emulsifier, a large drum where bread, cooked grain, herbs and spices could be gradually added from their own separate hoppers. When the mixture reached the required consistency, a screw mechanism forced it through a small opening into the casings. The skins had already been washed, scrapped and treated with hydrogen peroxide and vinegar in a separate part of the machine. An automatic tying arm twisted the links into two sizes, breakfast or cocktail.

The sausages were as popular as the hams. In fact, the only byproduct that met with any consumer resistance was the blood pudding. Then Akmet came up with the idea of dyeing the casing turquoise, the traditional colour to ward off the Evil Eye. After that it sold steadily, and for a while it was possible to imagine that nothing could go wrong.

The encounter with the Sheikh now caused all the old anxieties to resurface. Husayn would have preferred to regard that morning's incident outside the mosque as an isolated event, but it was now certainly more serious than that. His desire for alcohol vanished. He needed to take some kind of action before things became completely out of control.

(Unpublished, 2007)

Haifa Zangana

Excerpt from

City of Widows: An Iraqi Woman's Account of War and Resistance

From Chapter I: The Transition to Modernity

Ideological labels, whether communist, nationalist or Ba'athist, were the abayas that covered all cultural aspects and activities including fiction writing, research, art, poetry and literary criticism. Two prominent women poets of the period, Nazik al-Malaika (1923–2007) and Lamiah Abbas Imara (b. 1929) reflected this ideological schism at its very beginning under the republic. To a certain extent, they can be seen as representative of the women's movement and its struggle through two different approaches.¹

Nazik al-Malaika composed her first poem in classical Arabic at the age of ten. She studied literature at the Higher Teachers' Training College in Baghdad and later at Princeton University in the United States. In 1947, she published her first collection of poems, *Night's Lover*. In 1949, her second collection, *Splinters and Ashes*, was published, with a preface that introduced free verse as a new form of poetry that neither follows a strict metric system nor a particular rhyme scheme, thereby challenging centuries of classical form. This revolution in verse, shared with poet Badir Shakir al-Sayyab, aimed 'to seek a greater freedom which would enable the poet to realize an organic unity in his work, a fusion of form and content'.²

Nazik and Badir's influence was soon felt in the entire Arab world. With her husband Abdel-Hadi Mahbouba, Nazik helped found the University of Basra in the south of Iraq in the 1960s. Nationalism and social issues were important components of her poetry. She wrote about the occupation of Palestine, the Algerian Resistance against the French and the defeat of the Arab armies in the war against Israel in 1967.

Nazik was also a strong advocate of women's liberation. Her two lectures from the 1950s about women's position in patriarchal society, 'Woman between Passivity and Positive Morality' (1953) and 'Fragmentation in Arab Society' (1954), are feminist classics. Her poem *Lament of a Worthless Woman* might well represent her views on this subject. But it was her poem about Jamilah Buhrayd that greatly influenced my generation. Jamilah, a young Algerian girl who as a teenager fought against the French occupation of her country, was imprisoned and tortured by the French and became known throughout the Arab world as a hero of the Algerian Revolution. When Algeria gained its independence in 1962, Jamilah was released. The poem conveys the feeling of anger at the betrayal of Jamilah by the world. It is also a good representation of the historical commitment of Iraqi writers and poets to social and political issues.

Jamilah and Us³

Jamilah! Beyond the horizon, far beyond the borders of nations, you weep.
 Your hair loose, your tears soak the pillow.
 Are you really crying? Does Jamilah cry?
 Don't they give you music and song?
 Didn't they make offerings, of words and more words to you?
 So why the tears, Jamilah?

The details of your torture were on every tongue,
 And that hurt us, it was hard for our sensitive ears to bear.
 You were the one imprisoned and shackled
 And when you were dying for a sip of water,
 We marshalled all our songs
 And said, "We'll sing to you, Jamilah, through the long nights."
 All of us said: They gave blood and fire to drink.
 All of us said: They put you on the cross.
 But what did we do? We sang, we praised your heroism, your glory.
 We made promises, false promises, drunken promises,
 And we shouted, "Long live Jamilah! Long live Jamilah!"

We fell in love with Jamilah's smile.
 We adored her round cheeks.
 The beauty that prison had gnawed away at revived our love.
 We were infatuated with her dimples, with the braids of her hair.
 Did we not use her suffering to give meaning to our poetry?
 Be silent before this noble suffering.

Their intent was evil. They cut her with sharp blades.
 We gave her smiles, good intentions.
 They hurt her with knives.
 We, with the best of intentions, hurt her with ignorant, uncouth words.

The teeth of France tore her flesh.
 She was one of us, our kin,
 And the wounds we inflicted are more painful to bear.
 Shame on us for all the suffering of Jamilah!

Lamia Abbas Imara graduated from the Higher Teachers' Training College in Baghdad in 1950 and went on to work as a secondary-school teacher. Her father's death when she was young tinged her poetry with long shadows of sadness.

In an article titled '*I and My Abaya*', she deals sarcastically with the problems associated with wearing the full veil. She described its ugliness, its depressing colour and how it restricted women's movement. Above all, she blamed the *abaya* for the stagnation of literary life in Iraq. As expected, the article caused a stir among the conservative circles in Baghdad, but earned Lamiah immediate support from the Left.

In her first book of poetry, Lamiah defiantly wrote about love and seduction. One of her famous love poems is *If the Fortune-teller Had Told Me*. It ends with these two stanzas:

If the fortune-teller had told me
 My lover would bring me the sun in his hands in the
 Icy night
 My lungs wouldn't have frozen
 And the troubles of yesterday wouldn't have been
 Magnified in my eyes.
 If the fortune-teller had told me
 I would meet you in this maze
 I would have wept for nothing in this world
 But kept my tears
 For a day you might abandon me.⁴

Lamiah's poetry dealing with social and national issues, in particular the occupation of Palestine, was very powerful. In her poem *Palestine* she appeals to all Arabs to work together to liberate the occupied land and conveys the historical importance of the Palestinian issue in our lives. It was a priority for pioneer women poets, despite their engagement with family life, women's liberation and their different political affiliations. It continues to be so.

While Nazik became famous for her pan-Arab inclinations, Lamiah was associated more with the Left. Both would suffer under future wars, oppression and sanctions.

On June 28, 2004, in his farewell message to the Iraqi people, Paul Bremer, the US-appointed ruler of Iraq, recited these words by the ancient poet Ibn Zuraiq al-Baghdadi:

I bid farewell to a moon in Baghdad
 That rises over the skies above al-Karkh
 Although wishing to part with life's serenity instead.⁵

Like other occupiers in history, Bremer thought that by reciting Iraqi poetry he could show his understanding of Iraqi society, history and culture. He failed to understand that those who occupy a country can never reach the deep foundations of the people whom they are 'defending and protecting' at such a high cost. Fearing for his life, Bremer left Iraq in a hurry.

From Chapter IV: Resistance

To invade any country is in itself a hugely complex undertaking by any power. But the total lack of basic knowledge and understanding of Iraqi society or Arab-Muslim culture shown by the United States is extraordinary. For the United States to claim that they can win hearts and minds, and build a democracy that makes Iraq a model for the rest of the Arab world, without knowing the language and culture of the country, seems a bizarre notion by any standard.

Also bizarre is the type of solution being sought for what is now called the

'communication problem' in Iraq. The military is resorting to new technologies, using handheld voice-translating devices to replace human interpreters in the field and to convert simple English commands into Iraqi Arabic.⁶ One member of the US military shares his view on the dilemma. 'In years past, there wasn't a great need for the individual soldier to speak a foreign language to do his mission,' said Wayne Richards, branch chief for technology implementation at US Joint Forces Command. But in Iraq and Afghanistan, soldiers are increasingly interacting with Iraqi civilians, giving advice at checkpoints or guidance during home searches. 'During those door-to-door searches, the soldiers need to be able to calm them down and reassure them,' Richards said. 'We're fighting for hearts and minds. But if I can't tell her, "Ma'am, please calm down" ... that wouldn't be [re]assuring.'⁷

Poetry, whether in classical Arabic or Iraqi dialect, is a powerful tool of cultural resistance, which is almost impossible to counter by the occupation. One of our highly respected poets is May Muzaffar, who tries to capture the moments of destruction of her city and the killing of her people in her series of *Snapshots*⁸:

1

Under the ruins, which was a city
and the stones, which were a home
with the burnt trunks, which were trees
and the dried blood, which was a person
look there
for under the ruins and the stones and the dust
lie golden ingots uncollected by the invaders.

2

It is not enough to open your eyes
to look about you
to step with care
remember
that within you is a heart liable to explode.

Online resistance is also proving increasingly influential at a time when the occupation and its puppets continue to silence independent Iraqi writers, and to make it impossible for foreign journalists to function unless embedded. Some bloggers have shown themselves to be valuable and verifiable sources of reporting from inside Iraq, especially at a time when the much-trumpeted freedom of speech in print and other media has been curbed by bullet or decree. They provide opinions and analysis while documenting the times, places and details of their harsh reality. At times the blogs have a literary value, expressing deeply felt emotions and articulating fresh and provocative ideas, which are then available to people who would not otherwise have access to such information.

Indeed, through their online diaries or journals of their day-to-day existence, survival and struggle on various levels, and by virtue of their amateur nature, bloggers are providing the outside world with a candid lens to see beyond conventional reporting, to put faces and names to the often obliterated people of Iraq and to see the impact of war and occupation on their lives and those of the

people around them.

Riverbend, a young Baghdadi blogger, uses the old Arab tradition of storytelling to relate how we have been stripped of our right to build our own country:

Yesterday, I read how it was going to take up to \$90 billion to rebuild Iraq. Bremer was shooting out numbers about how much it was going to cost to replace buildings and bridges and electricity, etc. Listen to this little anecdote. One of my cousins works in a prominent engineering company in Baghdad – we'll call the company H. This company is well known for designing and building bridges all over Iraq. My cousin, a structural engineer, is a bridge freak ... As May was drawing to a close, his manager told him that someone from the CPA (Coalition Provisional Authority) wanted the company to estimate the building costs of replacing the New Diyala Bridge on the South East End of Baghdad. He got his team together, they went out and assessed the damage, decided it wasn't too extensive, but it would be costly. They did the necessary tests and analyses ... and came up with a number they tentatively put forward: \$300,000. This included new plans and designs, raw materials (quite cheap in Iraq), labour, contractors, travel expenses, etc. Let's pretend my cousin is a dolt. Let's pretend he hasn't been working with bridges for over 17 years. Let's pretend he didn't work on replacing at least 20 of the 133 bridges damaged during the first Gulf War. Let's pretend he's wrong and the cost of rebuilding this bridge is four times the number they estimated – let's pretend it will actually cost \$1,200,000. Let's just use our imagination.

A week later, the New Diyala Bridge contract was given to an American company. This particular company estimated the cost of rebuilding the bridge would be around – brace yourselves – \$50,000,000! Something you should know about Iraq: we have over 130,000 engineers. More than half of these engineers are structural engineers and architects. Thousands of them were trained outside of Iraq in Germany, Japan, America, Britain and other countries. Thousands of others worked with some of the foreign companies that built various bridges, buildings, and highways in Iraq. The majority of them are more than proficient – some of them are brilliant.

Iraqi engineers had to rebuild Iraq after the first Gulf War in 1991, when the 'Coalition of the Willing' was composed of over thirty countries actively participating in bombing Baghdad beyond recognition. They had to cope with rebuilding bridges and buildings that were originally built by foreign companies, they had to get around a lack of raw materials that we used to import from abroad, they had to work around a vicious blockade designed to damage whatever infrastructure was left after the war ... They truly had to rebuild Iraq. And everything had to be made sturdy, because, well, we were always under the threat of war.

Over a hundred of the 133 bridges were rebuilt, hundreds of buildings and factories were replaced, communications towers were rebuilt, new bridges were added, electrical power grids were replaced ... things were functioning. Everything wasn't perfect – but we were working on it. So instead of bringing in thousands of foreign companies that are going to want billions of dollars, why aren't the Iraqi engineers, electricians and labourers being taken

advantage of? Thousands of people who have no work would love to be able to rebuild Iraq ... No one is being given a chance.⁹

(*Seven Stories Press, 2008*)

- 1 Nazik led a secluded life in Egypt until her death in June 2007; Lamiah lives in the US.
- 2 M. Badawi, *An Anthology of Modern Arabic Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 18.
- 3 Nazik al-Malaika, 'Iraqi Poetry Today', *Modern Poetry in Translation* 19 (2003); guest editor Saadi Simawe.
- 4 Translated by Sara Marsden, *Ur* 2/3 (1982), 136.
- 5 Baghdad is divided into two parts by the Tigris River that flows through the centre of the city; the eastern part called al-Karkh and the western part al-Risafa. The fortified Green Zone, where Bremer resided for a year, is in al-Karkh.
- 6 Dr Mari Maeda, a researcher at the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), says the government has spent \$15 to \$20 million a year over the past five years developing the mobile translator technology, because there aren't enough human translators to go around. Xeni Jardin, 'Tech Solutions to Iraqi-U.S. Language Barrier', NPR, 13 November 2006; see www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6480428.
- 7 Renae Merle, 'First Ears, Then Hearts and Minds, Facing Shortage of Arabic Interpreters, Pentagon Seeks a Technological Solution', *Washington Post*, 1 November 2006.
- 8 Poet and critic, May Muzaffar was born in Baghdad and currently lives in Amman. She has published three volumes of poetry, many translations from Arabic into English and several collections of short stories. *Snapshots* was completed in June 2006, and translated from Arabic by Peter Philips.
- 9 Riverbend, 'The Promise and the Threat', *Baghdad Burning* (blog), 28 August 2003; see http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com/2003_08_01_riverbendblog_archive.html.

Nizar Qabbani

Would You Permit Me?

In a country where intellectuals are assassinated, where writers are accused of heresy, where books are burned, where each rejects the other, which silences speech, confiscates thought, denies questioning, I beg you: would you permit me?

Would you permit me
to raise my children as I wish, without you dictating the terms?

Would you permit me
to teach my children that religion is for God first, not for the *sheikhs*, not for the holy men, not for the people?

Would you permit me
to teach my young girl that religion is about morality, courtesy and integrity, before teaching her which foot to use before entering the toilet or which hand to use when eating?¹

Would you permit me
to teach my daughter that God is Love, that she may entreat Him and argue with Him without requiring the doctrine of others?

Would you permit me
not to mention the torments of the grave to my children, who do not yet know of death?

Would you permit me
to teach my daughter that attending to her education is much more important than memorising the verses of the Qur'an without understanding their true meaning?

Would you permit me
to tell my son to follow the example of our Prophet rather than worrying about his beard or his attire?

Would you permit me
to tell my daughter that her Christian friend is not an infidel,
and not to fear that she will go to Hell?

Would you permit me
to declare that God has not authorised anyone to speak in His
Name save the Prophet,
or to issue absolution certificates²
or proclaim redemption?

Would you permit me
to tell you that God has strictly forbidden the murder of
another human soul,
that 'whoever kills a person unjustly, it is as though he has
killed all of humanity'³
and that no Muslim has the right to kill another?

Would you permit me
to teach my children that God is greater, more merciful, more
just than all the Earth's theologians,
that His values are more precious than those held by the
merchants of religion
and that the balance of His tenderness is worth far more
than theirs?

Would you permit me?

1 From the *Qadaahul Haajah*, a set of rules governing hygiene (derived from *Hadith* sources).

2 Such certificates as granted by the Catholic Church (indulgences) and in certain Eastern Orthodox traditions.

3 The Qur'an 5:32, *al-Ma'idah*.

Contributors

Adonis (Ali Ahmed Sa'ïd Esber) is a Syrian-Lebanese poet and one of the most influential figures in Arabic literature today. He combines in his work a deep knowledge of classical Arabic poetry and revolutionary, modernist expression. Born in 1930 in northern Syria to a family of farmers whose father made him memorise poetry and the Qur'an, he was awarded a scholarship to a French *lycée* in Latakia in 1947, following which he studied philosophy at the Syrian University of Damascus. (Adonis adopted his *nom de plume* at age nineteen, invoking the Greek fertility god in the hopes of having his poems published in a newspaper.)

During his army service, Adonis was harassed for his political views and imprisoned for a year. In 1956 he settled in Beirut with his wife, the literary critic Khalida Sa'ïd, and became a Lebanese citizen. There he co-founded and edited *Sh'ir*, a progressive journal of poetry and politics. In 1968, with another journal, *Mawaqif*, he championed a radical rethinking of Arabic literary conventions. In 1970 Adonis was appointed Professor of Arabic Literature at the Lebanese University.

Adonis has taught at Censier Paris III, Collège de France, the Sorbonne, Georgetown University and the University of Geneva. In 1986, he moved to Paris, where he currently resides. He is the recipient of numerous honours, and his name has often been mentioned among Nobel Prize candidates.

Considered one of the Arab world's greatest living poets, Adonis is the author of numerous collections including *A Time Between Ashes and Roses*; *If Only the Sea Could Sleep*; *The Pages of Day and Night*; *Transformations of the Lover*; *The Book of the Five Poems*; and *The Blood of Adonis*. He is also an essayist, an editor of anthologies, a theoretician of poetics and the translator of several works from French into Arabic.

Ali Alizadeh was born in 1976 in Tehran. His family emigrated to Australia in 1989, where he obtained his PhD in Professional Writing at Deakin University, Melbourne, in 2004. His published works include the books *Eyes in Times of War* and *Fifty Poems of Attar*, with Kenneth Avery. He currently lives with his wife Penelope in Ankara, Turkey, and teaches English composition. He is an editor for the *Cordite Poetry Review*. His first novel *The New Angel* is forthcoming in 2008.

Jonathan Garfinkel is a Canadian poet and playwright whose plays include *The Trial of John Demjanjuk*. *Ambivalence* is his first book. A graduate of the University of Toronto Masters in Creative Writing programme, he resides in Toronto.

Roghayeh Ghanbaralizadeh received her MA in English Language and Literature from Allameh Tabatabai University, Tehran in 1997. She has taught English literature and translation at various Iranian universities. Her poems, articles and translations of such poets as Adrienne Rich, Langston Hughes, Audre Lorde have appeared in numerous journals in Iran. Her book *The Song of Phoenix: Life and Works of Sylvia Plath* was published in Iran in 2007.

Mai Ghossoub (1952–2007) was an artist, author and publisher. Born in Lebanon, she studied French literature at the Lebanese University and earned a degree in mathematics from the American University of Beirut. She moved to London in 1979, where she co-founded Saqi Books. The author of *Leaving Beirut* and *Imagined Masculinities: Male Identity and Culture in the Modern Middle East* (with Emma Sinclair-Webb), she was also a performance artist and sculptor. *Selected Writings of Mai Ghossoub* (2008) collects her essays, reviews and observations.

Malu Halasa is an editor and writer. She is co-editor of *Creating Spaces of Freedom: Culture in Defiance*; *Transit Beirut: New Writing and Images*; *Kaveh Golestan 1950–2003: Recording the Truth in Iran*; and *The Secret Life of Syrian Lingerie: Intimacy and Design*. The former managing editor of the Prince Claus Fund Library (2000–04) and a founding editor of *Tank* magazine (1998–2002), she writes for the British press.

Nancy Hawker has been studying the languages, history, culture, politics and economics of the Middle East for ten years. She is currently doing her doctoral research in Palestine on two refugee camps, and has recently discovered she is capable of wearing a strict teacher's costume, hair pinned back prim and proper, and carrying a red pen and subjecting secondary school pupils to English tests.

Khaled Mattawa is an author, teacher and translator who has published three books of poems and translated five volumes of modern Arabic poetry, including Saadi Youssef's *Without an Alphabet*, *Without a Face*, winner of the 2003 PEN New York Center translation prize. He has received a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship, the Alfred Hodder fellowship from Princeton University and three Pushcart Prizes. He is currently at work on a translation of selected poems by Adonis. Mattawa teaches in the graduate creative writing programme at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Majid Naficy was born in Iran in 1952 and by the 1970s had published a collection of poems, a book of literary criticism and a children's book, *The Secret of Words*, which won a national award. Politically active against the Shah's regime, he was persecuted following the 1979 Revolution as the new regime began to suppress the opposition; his first wife, Ezzat Tabaian, and his brother Sa'id were executed. He fled Iran in 1983 and settled in Los Angeles with his son Azad. He has since published six volumes of poetry in both English and Farsi, as well as numerous books of criticism. His most recent volume of poetry in English, *Father and Son*, was published in 2003. He holds a PhD in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures from UCLA and is also co-editor of *Daftarhaye Kanoon*, a periodical in Farsi published by the Iranian Writers' Association in Exile.

Nizar Qabbani (1923–98) was born in Damascus and is one of the Arab world's most revered poets. (He also had a long career in the Syrian diplomatic corps, which he joined after university.) He published his first collection of poems in 1944, which was decried by conservatives who considered it a deviation from the traditional school of Arabic poetry in form and content. Known as one of the most feminist and progressive of Arab poets, he published more than thirty-five works of poetry and prose, and also wrote song lyrics for some of the most famous singers of his day including Fairuz and Abdel Halim Hafez.

Raja Shehadeh is the author of the highly praised *When the Bulbul Stopped Singing* and *Strangers in the House*. A Palestinian lawyer and writer who lives in Ramallah, he is a founder of the pioneering human rights organisation al-Haq, an affiliate of the International Commission of Jurists and the author of several books about international law, human rights and the Middle East.

Yasmina Traboulsi est née en 1975 de mère brésilienne et de père libanais. Après *Les enfants de la Place* (prix du Premier Roman), *Amers* est son deuxième roman.

Mai Yamani is a Saudi anthropologist, writer and activist. She obtained a BA from Bryn Mawr summa cum laude and a PhD in Social Anthropology from Oxford University. Among her books are *Changed Identities: The Challenge of the New Generation in Saudi Arabia* and *Cradle of Islam: The Hijaz and the Quest for an Arabian Identity*. She is currently a research fellow at the Royal Institute for International Affairs in London.

Haifa Zangana is an Iraqi political commentator, novelist and former prisoner of Saddam Hussein's regime. She is a weekly columnist for *al-Quds* newspaper and a commentator for the *The Guardian*, *Red Pepper* and *al-Ahram Weekly*. She lives in London.

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