

Four Poems

Amal al-Jubouri

Co-translated by the author with David Allen Sullivan



To Marcel,
Iraqi Jew,
daughter of Rachel,
princess of Baghdad,
granddaughter of Babylon,
descendant of schizophrenic Iraq,
symbol of Iraqis' injustice to each other.

Its water is in our blood

Tonight we dragged the Euphrates here
and you realised Baghdad can morph
into a travelling city of departures,
that the diaspora can settle into
train stations stolen from our fates,
that prisoners
are flowers
that carry the aroma of empty spirits.

I made you jump back 2,600 years to our homeland of exiles,
our homeland that became our haven, suspended
between thieves and dictators.

Razqi flowers are white-robed orphans
that celebrate water and dance dew to the roof

on mornings when we sleep there.

We descend at dawn before the sun kisses us,
descend to beds of desire
and continue in sleepiness, in the smell of wet dust
that flows from the taps of our homes.

There, in the Jewish district of Bataween,
or in orchards of Karrada,
near Violette's brick palace of a house,
or behind the home of Ellen and David Khalaaschi,
behind Uncle Daniel's,
we sleep on, seemingly forever.

We want to collect all the flowers,
all the sighs of the gardeners, all the male lovers' sighs
as they surreptitiously nibble on their women's lips,
safe from religion
and norms
and laws.

Razqi petals escape silently
to the banks of the Tigris,
they listen to the shy scuff of our footsteps,
to the sighs
escaping from Iraqi prisons that sail with us.
When we're there, we cry for the Euphrates
to carry us here,

and when we're here, we cry for the imprisoned Euphrates,
drained by injustice and sadness,
domesticated by the prisons of turbaned extremists,
to carry us there.

We cry for the river, but we can't cry on its shores.
We cry because its water is in our blood —
flows from here to there, from there to here.
We cry because captivity is pillowed with soft tears
in our auctioned homeland.

So why, when we talk of love,
do we return to the destruction of the temple,
to this betrayal?

I told you, this is Baghdad.

Amal al-Jubouri

I wish I could wrap myself in her,
embrace her,
so the rain could tap into me
God's messages in semaphore.

When I touch the Thames I touch the Tigris,
but my fears for Iraq push my head underwater.

It's not just you . . .
it's not just the Euphrates . . .
it's not just the *razqi*,
not just the security,
not just the wishes,
but everything —
every single thing —
all of it
sinks
into silence.

The Promised Land

Is this the promised land you spoke of?
Is this the land the Lord told you to leave Ur for?
Is this the veil?
Every time I try to lift it I smell . . .
What is that? . . . God?

With you, and over you, I pray.
With me, and over me, please pray
for God to tear apart his veil.

Every time our souls pray
we bless the rain
that kisses believer's hands.

Each time more darkness is dispersed
the light of his voice shines brighter:

*Be patient Hagar,
he's within us.
Hold to me.*

*See?
He embraces all of us,
embraces our troubles,
drives Hagar to tears
whenever we perform this hajj.*

*And we pray
that we own God — owe God —
that we're owned by God,
until time's eclipsed.*

I found everything except for . . .

The land was our land. The homeland was our homeland.
It was unfamiliar with borders.
Our identities were worn like our faces. They knew us.

She slept in our wombs:
Mine and Sara's and Miriam's.

Abraham,
if you're listening to what I say,
or reading what I write, God has opened an account
at the post office of the new life.

I don't give a fig if you read my commandments and teachings
for God owns all our skies and all postal accounts,
but if you listen or read
you'll know
that I found your children.

Some have forgotten heaven lies beneath our feet,
that everything is a breath from the Lord
which spirits over them.

I found them afraid,
hiding fear in a hand-held mirror,
monitoring themselves on cameras,
using cell phones to summarize their lives,
which they then downloaded to computers . . .
so much for our fates.

Their fear made me afraid,
but I was patient as Job,
because I thought of you waiting for me,
just as Hagar waited for you all her life.

I found Omar bin Al-Khatab
and asked him about Ali.
I found Zainab in Nouriya's face,
Fatima in Farha's face
Hassan in Sami's face.

I found . . .
and I found . . .
and found . . .

everything . . .
saw everything.

I visited the prophet at the Aqsa mosque
and grew tired of the guard's questions because he forgot,
O Lord
that you sent his prophet to call the tribes to one *qibla*,
my *qibla*,
there in the peninsulars' prison.

I had to repeat, like a parrot, *Allah is Allah*
and *Mohammed is his prophet*.

What is this Abraham, you didn't teach them the art of welcoming guests?
I went to complain in the hope he would end the heresy of borders
and issue a decree:
Homelands are for people, religions are for God.

We are but members of your family.
Our home is here,
but our people are here and there, there and here.
Who? Why?
How did this happen?

I hid my anger at you and your God
so I wouldn't called ungrateful.

At the edge of the Aqsa we sat
facing the wailing wall
where we directed our hopes.

With the hymns of the Church of the nativity and resurrection
we sang.

I remembered Babylon,
whose name they wanted to rape,
as they raped our history
And I heard a voice say to us:
Pray,
sing,
stay. This is your land!

How do we stay in a land
that has been made foreign?
It's under siege.
A siege of ignorance,

a siege of desertification,
a crisis of the besieged mind.

And you and the lowest of your people, the fools,
surround me
at all times . . .
except here.

I cornered you with questions, asked:

*Why did you command Abraham
the way you did?
and is it true
that the Torah is your book?
What of your last book?*

Darkness does not malign truth. Darkness can't.
I found many things in your books,
I found everything
me,
her,
them,
but no truth called *Him*.

I found an illusory man who sold his heart,
found shrapnel of the ashes of his fires,
found in a creation fable all his women
found his son,

but not find one letter,
one pulse-beat,
of a human called *Father of Prophets*,
which my heart calls my man,
which other women call their man,
which Ismail calls his father.

I didn't find him, O Allah . . .
for we are the ones who created him
in the auction house of religions,
inherited from all our wars,
and because I wanted it to end I started . . .

because of you,
and because you are who you are,
and because we all know
and twist the words
and practise hypocrisy in the markets

where we're sold as slaves
in the course of miracles,
in the telling of fables,
in the name of religion,

they invented you,
claimed ownership over you,
fought over your pedigree,
doubted
and inherited hatred and stories,
so in the ruins of religions and their protective projected scripts,
in the talismans of storytellers, in the keepers of the paranormal
they sold you before you existed . . .

so who but you will show them the way?

Your strength is that you were a nation
that fragmented into pieces.

You were not actually born, nor was I.

The searcher in a stormy resurrection says:

*Take off the veil of veils,
I will bring to end
every cosmic argument about a lost door
or a magical legend,
every illusion
called you . . .*

*For I have found in the altar of my heart —
my altered heart — my altered mind —
the altar of my mind — everything except for You —*

everything

except

You

Apology

You're the secret religion of our childhood places,
you're the memory of Karrada,
the Baghdadi neighbourhood we frequented,
and Shamaash's house — your father's house —
was the first brick that helped build Baghdad's diversity.

This was not the Baghdad of frozen assets
but the mecca of all inclusive Baghdadis.

If only they knew you were forcibly evicted,
that the scent of *razqi* in their gardens
is your lingering perfume,
they'd chase away the parasites and blood-suckers
that've drained your Baghdad,
that've made Baghdad no longer their Baghdad.

They'd abrade the Iraqis who sang in the *Farhud* of 1941
their infamous songs as they expelled the Jews:

*How good the Farhud has come,
our work here is almost done!*

Your city's enemies
once watched your mother reading
in a sleep-inducing chant.

She packed love for people
the way others pack food for days of want.

She swears she'll only let you drink from Tigris,
only wash you in the Euphrates.

Mira, your mother, was the mother of Baghdad.
She was saddened by your father's sorrow
when you shouted at the world
to proclaim your Iraqi birth.

The traditions were the same ones Muslims buried
after becoming Muslim.

If a child's buried alive we must ask, for what crime was she killed?
Tribes still measure females with an eye
on the balance sheet of profit and loss.

The weapon of honour.

A female born with feet pointing east
is a good omen, as is a crow who screeches
in the face of mother
not recovered yet from the child birth's ripping.

Whenever a new year begins in Baghdad
the city gives birth to new houses of brick.

From her groves
the hanging gardens of the palace have grown
in the secret nooks and crannies of the walls.

Whenever they ripen, harvest is eminent.

The harvest of the *farhud* is another holocaust.
It reminds grandchildren of the holocaust-like hell
of the sanctions.

Their harvest is bitter hatred and ignorance.
They want the country's head.
Where Babylon Hotel once stood
there's talk about raping the palace,
your home . . .

Your first and original homeland.
Your country, strangled with stranger's whips.

O mother of Baghdad,
your daughter changed the name from *Amal*
to *Mira* because she did not wish
to share her name with the tribes,
the Babylonian Iraqis,
the Baghdadis.

She wanted not to be one of them.

But those who wield war's erasers,
who practice erasure through displacement,
raped your Baghdad.

They hired your family to drain the spinal cord
of the homeland, to end the flow of life.

The remaining Iraqis remain sick,
unable to recover from the crisis.

Displacement separates us into separate camps
in Iraq's memory banks.

Baghdad didn't know a matchstick before your birth,
they only knew mud houses,
only got taught the first lessons of civilization.

Baghdad shouts your name, speaks of your daily affairs.
They co-opted forgetfulness,
were won over by those who stole your dream.

She's Eden's Paradise.
She's a lung that breathes Baghdad's pure air
for her diaspora-dispersed people.

You wished you could say farewell to her
when you greeted the heavy visitor.

You and she should have left from there.
You wished the visitor
would hurry to arrest your breath,
so infatuated with her you were.

You quoted Ahmed Safi Al-Najafi:

*Iraq has returned, but O what a cruel return.
We hear all about Baghdad, but we don't see her.
We'll never see her,
for they've written her into a revenge story
they haven't tired of telling yet.*

Revenge writes in the impoverished language of death,
in the language of lies, in the hypocrisies of nations,
and in poverty's elementary curses.

They've forged new features for our Baghdad,
despoiling history's virginity.

They've forced her to bow her head
after they threw acid to blind the light from her eyes.

You alone, of all our afflicted people,
returned to us.

You carried her greatest secret —
Baghdad's secret —

and returned Baghdad to us.

The mark of the Iraqi *maqam*,
of Salima Pasha,
of Nadhum Al-Ghazali,
of Afifa Iskander,
of Mayda Nezhet,
and of Yusif Omar.

The princess of cities
and the creator of worlds,
slave of the cleansings
and the myths of denomination,
victim of bombings
and history's revenge,
history's atonements,
O widow of recuperating Iraq
remove the black veils from your face.

O icon of sadness and loss
rise with the mothers,
the displaced,
the migrating,
those slaughtered in silence — by silence —
for who but you
can bring back hope to Baghdadis?

Notes:

The above poems are selected from the author's forthcoming volume *You Engraved the Torah on my Eyes* [حفرت التوراة. في عيني]

Its water is in our blood:

Elen Dangoor is the granddaughter of the Grand Rabbi of the Jewish community at the time, and the wife of David Khalaaschi, the son of Ezra Khalaaschi, one of the wealthiest Baghdadi families.

Dawod Khalaaschi never visited Israel. When asked why, he said: *Because I dream of returning home, to Iraq.*

Apology:

The *Farhud* was the pogrom carried out against the Jewish population of Baghdad, Iraq, on 1–2 June 1941, immediately following the British victory in the Anglo-Iraqi War. The term has entered Iraqi dialect and memory. The term *Hawassim* was used after the fall of the regime to refer to the collective acts of robbery when authority fails. The songs from the time dishonour Iraqis. I apologise to Iraqi Jews who suffered, and whose identities were stripped from them. I apologise to all the faiths of Iraq: Christians, Yazidis, Kurds, Sabiens, Shabak, Turkoman, Bahaiis, Kakaiis, and Muslims, who have suffered because of prejudice and divisiveness.

Violet's daughter changed from Amal to Mira after the *Farhud* because Amal is a Muslim name. *Memoirs of Eden's Paradise* collects Violet's writings on daily life in Baghdad before the establishment of the Iraqi state in 1921.

I found everything except for . . .

Nouriya's father and brother were killed during the *Farhud* events. After 60 years of enforced migration from Baghdad, she still dreams of returning to Iraq.

Farha is one of the Jews of Iraq who was forced to leave to Israel after imprisonment. She still dreams of returning to Baghdad even though she's over 90.

Religious bodies in Iraq tried to change the name of Babylon to Imam Al Hassan in 2016. The civil society campaign succeeded in stopping the movement under the hashtag #MynameisBabylon.