

ADNAN AL-SAYEGH



THE DELETED PART

EXILED WRITERS INK



The Deleted Part

By Adnan al-Sayegh

Translated by Stephen Watts

and

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Stephen Watts is a poet, editor and translator. His own most recent books include *Gramsci & Caruso* (Periplum 2003), *The Blue Bag* (Aark Arts 2004) and *Mountain Language/Lingua di montagna* (Hearing Eye 2008). Recent co-translations include *Modern Kurdish Poetry* (Uppsala University 2006), A. N. Stencl's *All My Young Years* (Five Leaves 2007), Meta Kusar's *Ljubljana* (Arc 2009), Ziba Karbassi's 'Collage Poem' and Adnan al-Sayegh's 'The Deleted Part' (both Exiled Writers Ink 2009). Current works include an updated edition of *Mother Tongues, Selected Poems* of Ziba Karbassi and an online bibliography of post-1900 world poetry in English translation. He has frequently worked as a poet in hospitals and schools and in 2006 he worked with HI-Arts in Scotland on issues of mental health and well-being. In 2007 he was awarded a three-year Arts Council grant to enable him to extend his writing and research. His next book of poetry is due to be published by Enitharmon.

Marga Burgui-Artajo was born in Navarra in the north of Spain and initially studied chemistry. Always an avid reader and in conscious reaction against an education experienced under Franco, she began to study Arabic in 1981, partly to recover for herself some of the roots of her own Hispanic culture, and partly after reading Juan Goytisolo. Since 1994 she has lived permanently in London and has worked at Paddington Library where she established a substantial holding of both classical and contemporary Arabic literature, and where she also came into closer contact with London-based Arabic writers and bookshops. At present she works with a diverse range of cultural groups across and beyond London.

Agamemnon

He came back
from the dusts of war
with a wounded heart, his
arms full with drums & gold
dreaming of Clytemnestra's
honeyed lips that at that very
moment Aegisthus was melting
with his own, as every night.
And as he opened the door
he sensed on her lips' grease
the thousands of corpses he'd
abandoned under the open sky
& recalled how he'd forgotten
to leave his own body there.

Baghdad 14th January 1993

the earth is narrower than we thought
.... narrower than that miser's palm ...
and who'll take the orphan to safety
where the horizon goes dark ...
and the face of morning blacks out).

.....
No worries
I piled together what was left of me
and charged ahead
– but where to ?!
Between you & death there's an invisible muzzle
and the question two small children asked :
 - "Daddy, when are you coming back .. ?"

I turned round ...
The sergeant yelled : This is your homeland now ...
my heart shuddered, white with weakness
I choked with tears of humiliation :
- O sky of Iraq ...
 is there air to breathe

I looked everywhere ...
Iraq's sky was punctured with shrapnel
and it was

.....
I tripped on a rock
saw my burst boot laughing at me ...
(- No worries ...
let the fat clerks who sit behind their desks write
 about – the fat of the land)

.....

In a room, twenty years ago
She used – fearfully – to mend my worn trousers
Washing off her shame with her tears

.....
- Father, where is my pocket money ... ?!
my friends have gone to school already ...

.....
(My friends have gone to their bullets
such destinies are deaf ...)

My friends ...

my friends ...

my fri ...

I fell ...

and my homeland gathered me in ...

and we raced to the barricade

challenging death together

Which of us will protect –

O my homeland –

his own head ... ?

We have just one helmet ...

just one.

Baghdad 1986

A Hole

A passing shot
glanced his sleep –
and the blood of
defeated dreams
gushed viscous
onto his pillow.

Baghdad 1st January 1993

Schizophrenia

In my homeland
fear gathers me up & pulls me apart :
a man who writes
and another who watches over me –
from behind closed curtains

Baghdad 10th January 1987

Iraq

Iraq disappears with
every step its exiles take
and contracts whenever
a window's left half-shut
and trembles wherever
shadows cross its path.
Maybe some gun-muzzle
was eyeing me up an alley.
The Iraq that's gone : half
its history was kohl & song
its other half evil, wrong.

Rotterdam 1997

Attempt

Fix it on the anvil
And hammer it without mercy
Hit it ...
Hammer it ...
I told him :
Hammer it hard
Hammer it blacksmith
So hard ...
It will stretch
 this heart
And become a bridge
To carry me to oblivion

Baghdad 10th June 1991

Critical

They write up my lines
split me into chapters
catalogue my references
print the whole works
get me in the bookshops
bad-mouth me in print
& I
haven't
even
opened my
mouth :
yet !

Damascus 1996

Reckoning

O Lord
Spread out Your records
& I will spill my intestines
Then let's settle our scores

Beirut 1996

Complaint

A lame man looked at the sky
And cried out in anger:
O Lord
If you hadn't enough of clay
Why the haste to create me?

Amman 1994

Al-Hallaj¹

Al-Hallaj took me
To the highest hill in Baghdad
And showed me all its
Minarets and temples,
Churches and bells
Then he beckoned me :
'Look' he said 'count' –
How many prayers daily rise up
From our breaths, yet no-one
Ever tries to ascend
From His meaning to His vision
So as to warn Him of
The ravages of all the tyrants
The deviations of the jurists
& what the guards have done

Beirut 10th August 1996

1 - *A legendary Sufi master who lived in between 858 - 922 AD. He inspired many subsequent Sufi mystics, including Rumi. He was tortured and publicly executed by the Abbasid rulers for what they deemed "theological error" threatening the security of the state.*

Al-Hallaj Again

Who will deliver me ?
No-one in the Jubbah but He !
No-one in the Jubbah but me !
I am the one
He is the One & only
How were we spasmed together ?
How were we rent apart ?
In a moment of drink
Between my doubting Him
And my piety ?
How would I know !

London 2004

God's Money

On al-Hamra' street
The religious man walks with his rosary
The tramp goes by with barefoot dreams
The politician crosses, wasted with gain
The intellectual passes, vaguely astray
Between Soho and Hay al-Silleem.
All rush past, sparing not a thought
For the blind beggar
Only rain drips onto his palms
Stretching out to God

Café de Baquet, Beirut 1996

(*) *The three poems above, together with the one below, 'Night Prayers' (including 'My God Is One') were read by Adnan al-Sayegh at the third al-Marbed Poetry Festival in Basra, which took place between 15-17 April 2006. The poems – later referred to as 'Slightly Contentious Texts' – upset the armed militia and after reading them al-Sayegh was threatened with death & having his tongue cut out. He was forced to leave Basra in haste through Kuwait & return to his exile in London.*

Night Prayers

.....

you see
Your God only
in blades and blood
I perceive Him
in a word &
a song & in
the blue of her
eyes & the sea

.....

verses
have annulled
verses
and you want your head
rock-hard and
unchanged through the years

.....

you who are a man,
consider
how you talk with your Lord & the devil
is it then too much to hope you'd learn
how to talk with your fellow men ...

.....

bell or
minaret
– O Servant
of God –
why
won't you
hear your
Lord
in a
flute ?

London 2004

My God Is One

Neither Catholic Nor Protestant
 Neither Shi'a Nor Sunni

Whoever bisected
 Whoever dissected
 Whoever deliberated
 Whoever segregated
 & so dis-integrated
 It's their aims
 Their interests
 Their laws &
 Their armies

They're the ones who lack all faith !

London 2004

Deleted Part Of 'Risalat al-Ghufran'²

Lying on my back
and looking up at the sky
I count the sighs rising up to God each day
and the drops of rain dripping from His eyelids
and I call Him on the phone and
ask for Him
His pretty secretary replies
that these days He's so busy
so snowed under
with all our tattered petitions stacked in the store rooms.
Oh my lady, I mouth at her, I so need to see Him
if only for one moment
 but He's never replied
whatever I've asked.
I want to appeal to Him before I take leave of my miserable
life
and before He lays before me the inventory of my sins :
My God, the Most Just
did I lose such a vast paradise
simply on account of one apple
was it because of but one fallen angel
that I had so to prostrate myself in humiliation ?
.....
Our Father ...
Our Father most Merciful
I know You won't make fun of me as they do

2 - Famous book written by the rebellious blind poet Abul Ala'a al-Ma'ari (973-1057 A.D). Its skeptical humanism and brilliant language is said to have inspired Dante's comedy.

but I feel miserable and without hope
I simply want a patch of this earth to lay me down shoeless to
sleep
just one loaf of bread from among the teeming ears of wheat
that sway before me like dancing waists

.....

.....

I sit in front of the door of the Kufa Mosque
I sit in front of the Cathedral of Lund
I sit in front of the Wailing Wall
I sit in front of the temple of Buddha
my hand palm-pressed to my knee
and I see how many times we've raised our hunched backs
and how many times we've bowed ourselves down
and in spite of all this
no-one pays any attention to our guttered gush of tears
Ah, I want to go one day to His Kingdom to see
where the clouds of our moaning end up
and this planet that has been rotating
with our scuffles & drums, our curses & supplications
down so many millions of years
as to wake Him from His cosmic siesta
that He might look out from His balcony
and observe us :
And who knows
maybe He's gotten bored with our grievances
and has turned His Holy Face away
and forgotten us forever.

It seems I'm kicking the terrestrial globe with pokey shoes
and that I'm not letting it hit the ground
until I can pass it back to Him

And if in Your vast Paradise I could find
ink &
 wine &
 reed-pens
then might I publish my poems
without need of the censor ?

.....
And if You were to give me
ten thousand hours to dandle
what would be left for my Love ?

And

And

.....

Luleå, Sweden 3rd April 1998

What Happened To The Sage

As he was delivering his talk
in the crowded hall
They were there
dissecting his corpse according to
the pattern of intelligence reports
leaving the remains of his blood
in the family fridge.
When he came down off the podium
amid the music of the applause
he felt for his neck
found nothing but a dreadful void
and a deep gash, damp across his collar.
He ran in panic into the audience ...
craving the safety of the empty chairs ...
stumbling over the echoes' guffaws

.....

.....

Nobody
just an old attendant
drivelling on about
some mad man
he'd seen a moment before –
with his own eyes –
searching between the seats
for his severed head

Amman 1993

Doors

I rap on a door
It opens up
All I see of the door is me !
It opens up
Through I go
Nothing but another door.
Lord how many more
Holding myself back from
me ?

Malmö 1996

Text

I forgot myself at my library desk
And got up to go
But as I started up the road
I realised that I was nothing but the shadow of a text
That I could see walking uneasily in front of me
And greeting people as if it were me

Malmö 2nd February 2000

End

From the icebox of
sadness, I take out the arak
and drink the whole bottle.
I drink to my friends, all exiles,
through the tunnels
without country, without
cigarettes, without passports
I raise a toast glass after glass,
then corpse after corpse.
And when I collapse on the street
from my drunkenness
it is they who will carry me
home in their coffins.

Baghdad 1993

A difficult balance
exchanging a dream for an illusion
 one woman for another
 an exile for an exile
And I say to you :
 where is the path !?

Amman 11th January 1994

Ulysses

On Malmö bridge
I saw the Euphrates stretching out its hands
To carry me
Where to ? I said
And my dream couldn't end
Until I saw the Umayyad army
Besieging me from every direction.

Goodbye to a window in the land of devastation
Goodbye to the palms pared of their green by war-planes
Goodbye to the clay oven of my mother
Goodbye to our history rusting on its racks
Goodbye to what may be left in our hands
Farewell
We're leaving a bitter land
But going where ?
All exile is bitter

.....
The palms whose helixes used to give me shade
Of them nothing's left but a pale image
Empty benches now
And their trunks, gallows for our dreaming necks
And the Euphrates whose pain baptised me
Flows on impassive past plaintive villages

O ... Ulysses
If you hadn't come
If only the road to Malmö were long
Long
Long
Long

.....

.....

You stranger unable to touch one instant of joy
How come all exile now is a prison without walls

Malmö 18th August 1997



Adnan al-Sayegh was born in al-Kufa, Iraq in 1955.

One of the most original voices of the generation of Iraqi poets that came to maturity in the 1980's, his poetry, sharp & crafted with elegance, carries an intense passion for freedom, love and beauty. His words denounce the devastation of wars and the horrors of dictatorship, but also act on quieter and more personal levels. In the 1980's he was conscripted in the Iran-Iraq war and in 1993 his uncompromising criticism of oppression and injustice led to exile in Jordan and the Lebanon. In 1996 he published "Uruk's Anthem" – a book-length poem, one of the longest in Arabic literature – in which he richly articulates deep despair at the Iraqi experience. On its publication he was sentenced to death in Iraq and took refuge in Sweden. Since 2004 has been living in exile in London.

Ten collections of his poetry in Arabic, among them, "Formations", "Uruk's Anthem" and "Carrying his Exile under his Arm" have been published and a further one is in press. The poems we have translated recognise the trajectory of his exile and the concerns of his life.

Adnan al-Sayegh has received several international awards, including the Hellman-Hammet International Poetry Award (New York 1996), the Rotterdam International Poetry Award (1997) and the Swedish Writers Association Award (2005). His poetry has been translated into many languages and he is frequently invited to take part in poetry festivals around the world.

Cover by Faisel Laibi

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