

NASEER FLAIH HASSAN
Poems and prose

POEMS FROM *DAYPLACES* (2009)

Story of (a) time

The story of that time; like tyrants drowning in the blood-drenched depths¹; in the (wood's quiet) we were, the night was in us; maybe we were the stars, maybe we carried our garments to the mouth of the river.

Dante says: the Centaur throws the tyrants into the river of blood. I say: the wood is in the heart. We inhabit Al Midan squareⁱⁱ where even the rooms are homeless. The day of judgment passes us by unnoticed. We are naked in the square of the universe.

Ithaca

His vehicle drives from Al Dakhil streetⁱⁱⁱ to the Square of the others.
He's dreaming of returning to something else, what with all the roads that had left him.
His body had stumbled into this trip, this trip has found a vehicle...
The evening shines in the mosque's porthole. A fistful of men gather around a woman weeping the yarn.

Homer, involuntarily

I don't mean poetry, I mean blindness.
The jar of evening we are inserted into...
Then every color vanishes, the young woman stands on the porch of her ruins. As the foam rises, old age enters the door. For those who didn't know the sun, the eyes' tombstones allow an encounter, blocking the sands of vision.

Dante, Again

You enter the dimness, sink in the darkness, choke like tyrants...
You are a tyrant too, but the crowd is of your lost sons; the years of your age rush naked now - from the depths of the soluble ink into the jars of the poem

Three Rainy Nights (from The Thousand Nights)

The first night:

The air poured down heavily, and the sky stepped back few steps, when we entered the café street, a seller came upon us: (sirs; in the way there are years, from the thicket of age..).

The second night:

The lamps remained turned on all the day; the world was accumulating in the rain; and the caravans send their spores in small grains among houses...the (sea) smacks the café's belly button, and starlings spread on Al Rasheed^{iv} columns; an ancient square of alluvium which didn't obliterate, the soul kept knowing it in spite of the veil which nights accumulated.

The third night:

The sleepless woman; resembles the dawn, and the city is drowned in its magic...
The garage of evening loads passing woman something, of the remains of the truth, and house of evening which was left behind.

An Evening

This evening reminds me of the beginning, when I was closer from windows' iron to the sun, and when I was watching: how the windows' iron grows to a plant in the evening. I was entering in the presents, which didn't notice; in a golden ribbon of an empty box, which is life; and what it was supposed to be.

Recuperation

You stop someday, to find out that you are not what you thought to be; and what even more important: you are no one.
Clouds' color modifies, and the rain which meets it, and the glass which embraces the rain. Then, you will not be but a point, moving on the days; and in spite of fear and pain, in spite of rooting and echo, sends its fire arrow afar -in a wood- where it meets nothing but the density.

concealment*

This body I knew since...*visage*; I knew that road which led to its hand palms, and the fire of nights-ether on its face's secret.

3 HASSAN [editing work in progress]

Today I bear it, or guides it so it follows me, while we exchange some silence, about its *well*, and about those long ways which were not who met him.

* Joseph...?

Chaos *

That rude scene; the eyes' crush against a cloud, which continued to raise with (Al Thawra) a street, muddy, like the ways- on a rose of mud..
(anciently) we knew life; the air matured by the sun, and the wine in a night of gloominess' clarity\ we knew the wick which shakes towards beauty; or a wide street, years rim its sides, in a lost drop of wine; on the face of that life which was nothing, but life...

* nostalgia...?

Shortcuts *

Why, you
Still

.....

..here?

* admonition
(along the age) * *

** (you enter the door of dust, and stare at the grave):
- welcome, you will forget (your family) * * *
you will be happy.

* * * people are illusion, the family is lofty like pine.

POEMS FROM *THE CIRCLE OF SUNDIAL* (1998)

Theft

When he woke up from his dream
He stood by the window;
The war was gazing at him

When he returned from his sadness
.....
.....
He was forty.

Transitory Experience

We passed by the river...
We left on the bridge's dusty air, a dream
That lightened-
We returned...
And said: tomorrow
When the bridges become heavens
We'll get the dream to rain...

Were we close, meanwhile, to the idea of love?

Hope

The candle
In the well of night
Flickers...
Disperses its flame slowly

Night overtakes it-
It moves away...
Ascends in light
Ascends in gale
Returns with the returning glow
like sails...

The usurper night
is detained
In the well of the candle.

*

FROM *SUGGESTED SIGNS* (2007)

Pollution

The prostitute, at the front of the street
Is gazing at me:
The disastrous face...
The blue clouds...

The prostitute, at the front of the street, approaches
(While I depart-receding-through the stifling smoke of vehicles, into a face of a woman,
who didn't come...).

Cinema

On a signboard, a naked woman
Among soldiers
Among crowds
Among thieves
.....
On a signboard
A woman

Among naked crowds

Childhood

In the ancient childhood
when you were free
It wasn't freedom
But was rain:

The lonely step which drowned in the mud
Remained immobile
Exposed to the ages.

Rain

Nothing
Rain alone
Words are bubbles
People...
Footsteps...
The meaning...
Nothing
You and the meaning
Alone...

Medusa

The human hand forgets
the white drop squeezed
from the cortex of ways

Close to the tea
Distant from home

The protrusive veins

petrify

The glass snakes
draw a figure of their own
on the air's cup

The human hand
remembers.

FROM *BEING HERE* (2008)

Eternity

Surgical ward
Previous generations
Surgery table
Swords
Horses
Minarets...

And here we are
On the same table
-As it has been always-
Naked
With eternity.

The forgotten house

Under the sun
Words pass...
Remote words,
-of dead people-
whom time no more touches their foreheads.

No night, there is
No sun...
We come, circulate, and leave,
And the sun gazes,
Behind the years' ways,
At a forgotten house
Where words come
And don't leave.

*

A NEGATIVE*

To those days--bombing monuments...
When the soul talked for long to the roar of the truth...

1

Procreation of light enlightens a hazy picture of fossilized memory and of panicked horrors of an effaced dream:

"Streets...warplanes...faces sink in sadness...eyes disappear in their caverns...voices of rescue...newscasts...darkness...light...,night...day..."

He opened his eyes: the sun finger was pinned on his forehead, and a beautiful sparrow was jumping in the fist of light...

2

"From the very beginning, the soul awakened this flower of land, and awakening the land...a feather in the creation ever she was...spreading her forms inside the folds of time..."

He closed his eyes and gazed at the memory: the flower of death is still standing since what, he can't remember...he turned the evening and awoke a small child fist in his silence bottom...

"The soul was turning the stones off to enlighten the lilies, unweave her shapes in the space silence...and when she settled in the creation quiver, she turned to awaken the sea..."

A sudden call awoke him:

-New blood blew out in the routes of pain.

He opened the misery and stored the message!

The child's fist...how small it is!

9 HASSAN [editing work in progress]

He still remembers when he met it one night in the cumulating of slaughters, and how it surrendered to him...

"The soul was..."

Vertigo: the child's fist...the soul flower...the rescue noise...a vortex moving away vanishing inside a coal-black focus...

3

He fumbled his sorrow and remembered the sea...and a night when the sky was menstrous, its red veins were lightening melting the emigrants...he remembered the killed ones, and the fallen in the storms' madness, their burdens in the freshets, and a night when they awoke after in the morning of the cities...

4

A sky, a number of ancient prophets, and a history's headsman fettering them...

They encompassed him, fumbled his wound and the bandage, and clarified the reasons that postponed their resurrection...

He was unable to smile so he satisfied with drowning:

"Here is the soul in the sea's temple spreading her hair, carving a small statue of a sea for no reason but the appetence of creation, he extended his arm and met her, he found himself in the heavens of hope...he remembered the lost ones in the disasters' ages, and a journey where they realized the secret, so they amassed pain mountains, and set fire to the memory.

5

A cloudy burst, light...

The warplanes returned so he fell down on ground, watching an ember moving away in the folds of time...

How slim the soul was in the lucency of misery! ...existence, minutes, and a cry that extends from the appetence of earth 'till the body's secret quiver...

Slim!—he even saw the silence as a bee, and the sorrow crucified on an extinguished cry!

The earth suddenly shook—a close shelling!

The warplanes were, since the morning, spitting sadness and pestilence, they were infected with blood...

6

The eye remained red in the eyelid, the ground remained red...

"Dripping...ceilings drip...red storming in the streets...appetence at the boundaries of the existence sending a bird to the moon's glitter...a star unweaving the dream for ages...a primitive one tearing up a snooze's mouth...a fist falling on the ground followed by churlish ones with claws and weapons..."

He opened his eyes; the dream blueness was injurious so he closed them up:

"The freshets' madness besieges the streets...and the refugees say farewell to their women and life...graveyards float and read their names on the panel of fate...hospitals overflow...rescue sounds...newscasts...faces disappear in the wave of calamity..."

The soul was skinned in the temple of the earth

And the earth was fevered and shivering..."

And he was shivering when he was awoken by his killed neighbor's fingers...

7

Glow: A nurse moved a certain window shade so the glow infiltrated...

The child's fist is marked in the silence, and the heart's windows are wide open in the air:
"The soul remained seeding the years till the sea blossomed, and when the mud leafed she
metamorphosed it into an ewer, and bred in the palpitation 'till it took shape, so she took
shape, dropped her legend, and cast herself into creation, after leaving a warm semen..."

8

A sky, and some ancient profits, turned their faces, and moved away in the sky...

9

When he woke up, misery scars had already blossomed...

He became a shape in wars waste wasting his years, disappearing in the emptiness like a fly
in the fist of light...

He got effacing his dreams' evening and the stars...and sleeping cuffed to an image of a
snake hissing at broken crowds...

He was infected with sorrow, and sudden wounds' burst...

And one night, when death scenes were embodied on the air's foam, he mumbled a cloudy
word and died...

10

Sun!...the earth's flower in the prophecy's lucency; a child's small fist leaving its traces on
the silence...and a daily song about creation grows in a starting story:

It was a story about the seasons of sorrow

And it was the journey of the pigmented body

The processions of the years strolled

Till the dream petrified

And the hope was driven back

The years were injurious like spearheads

In that late journey

Here we are in our book

Here we awaken

Our years are exposed to the lightning

Our depths are exposed to the horizon

Touches us and existence

And a forgotten image of life

Come upon us

In the upcoming cities.

* A negative of a film. This text expresses the war in 1991.

IV.

IRAQIS AND THE REAL RESISTANCE

At last, a real Iraqi election, the event we have waited decades to see, is coming true. And now, as we prepare to vote, we remember all those who sacrificed their lives, their families and their youth, so that such a day would come. These words might look abstract to those who did not live under Saddam's regime, but for us, who lost loved ones and suffered long years of pain and sorrow, they are not abstractions at all.

We did not expect the events that have occurred since the fall of Saddam on April 9, 2003. Most of us expected the tyrant's collapse would make the remnants of his regime—and others who assisted the monster to stay in authority for so long, feeding on the blood of Iraqis—withdraw into themselves, keeping silent, hoping for the forgiveness of the people. As we see, this did not take place. Instead, they reorganized their resources and power, formed regular links with foreign terrorists, and took the initiative to start again, although in quite different circumstances, what they had been doing for years: killing innocent Iraqis.

A few weeks ago, a relative of mine, a simple worker, one of those Iraqis whom the regime forced to spend his youth in military service and wars, was killed in an explosion on a highway. He was the father of six children. A few days ago, one of my best friends, a writer and a highly educated person—a man who had managed to resist the political pressure and threats from the Baathists for decades—was assassinated by remnants of the regime. Meanwhile, there have been countless explosions in Baghdad recently, one of which took the lives of 37 children.

And yet, we are resisting. The people who opposed the dictatorship for decades continue to struggle against it, even as it changes to secret bloody organizations using terror, assassination and hidden bombs as weapons. The true "resistance" is not the bloody terrorist groups and lost regime murderers shown on the Arab or American media all the time, but everyday Iraqis. People who suffered for decades because of Saddam's killers and now hope to have a good, normal life like other people in the world. People like my relative who was going to work to feed his family, and people like my friend who challenged all the threats and risks and decided to make his voice heard and his existence felt.

When the regime collapsed, most Iraqis believed this would be the start of a new period, one of peace and development, a period in which our people could take off the military uniform from their bodies and souls and start rebuilding their country. But now, faced with the challenge of terrorists who would try to destroy our chances for a peaceful life, Iraqis are feeling once more the call to battle, but this time for a totally different reason: a battle in the name of democracy and progress

Just as in the past, when the crimes of Saddam fed the deep hatred for the man and his regime in the Iraqi soul, so now the increasingly criminal actions of anti-democracy groups feed a sense of resolve in the breasts of Iraqis to fight for their democratic future. Today, I see how friends, relatives and acquaintances—some of whom have lost loved ones to the terrorists—are now rising to the challenge, not only to take part in the coming elections, but to participate in the future of Iraq's development. I see how people who once seemed hesitant or apathetic about events have become aware that the battle for democracy and freedom is their own battle, and if they are going to have a better life for themselves and their children, they must take part in this battle one way or another.

This feeling extends not only to intellectuals but to the average person in the street, who has gradually become aware that the new enemy, the new disease that infected this country after the collapse of the regime, is something we must face, sooner or later. It is taking away each day the lives of more and more Iraqis. It is not going to stop and yet it must be stopped.

And by this spirit, and through this spirit, we Iraqis are going to participate in the elections, that political slap in the face for all those who support terrorism and want to postpone our destiny as long as they can. Our increasing spirit of resistance and hope for the future is perhaps the best example of how terrorism can never stop a people's will to be free.

FRONT PAGE MAGAZINE, 24TH JANUARY 2005

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ELECTION DAY IN IRAQ WAS A SACRED DAY

On January 28, I went to my grandfather's house in Baghdad, where I was registered to vote, to participate in the national election. I had to arrive early because a three-day curfew had been imposed.

It was clear to me that I, like many other Iraqis, *had* to take part in this election. First, because it is our natural right as citizens to express ourselves politically. Second, we need to create a real democratic basis for our future, especially with all the challenges we face from the remnants of the Baath regime, foreign terrorists, the Arab media and neighboring governments that do not want democracy to succeed in Iraq. Lastly, I felt that it is our moral and spiritual duty to those Iraqis who sacrificed their lives in the struggle for democracy, whether they were killed under Saddam decades in the past or by terrorists just a few days ago.

When I arrived at my grandfather's home, I found many relatives already there, and, as expected, we began to talk about the election. It was obvious that in spite of our differences over which parties we supported, we shared the same will to vote. Most surprising, however, was the realization that despite being in the same family, we had our own ideas about whom to elect and we were openly discussing these ideas among ourselves. Nothing like this could have been imagined before 2003.

The atmosphere of anxiety and expectation continued into the next day, and while we talked about our new political ideas, we watched the TV closely, monitoring developments in the streets. We decided that we would try to vote early on Sunday, around 7 a.m. – right when the polling centers opened – although this would be riskier. When night came, we began to hear sporadic shooting and worried that those were attacks against the police and guards of the nearby school buildings, where the election centers were located.

On Sunday morning at 6:30 my uncle knocked on my bedroom door and told me he had already passed by the poll site and was told that it would indeed open at 7. My uncle, cousin, mother and I walked in the semi-empty street with the expectation that we might be attacked at any moment, since it was obvious that anyone moving about at this hour of the morning was going to vote. As we neared the election center, we began to hear explosions. We didn't stop.

The polling site was not yet open when we arrived. We stood in a queue with three or four other people who had arrived earlier, looking up at the soldiers standing guard on the roof of the school building. After a few minutes, we were joined in line by another person, who shouted "Congratulations!" and other encouraging words to express his excitement and zeal. Then the center opened, and we voted. When I put my finger in the ink, I felt so proud, as if I had put my finger in a sacred liquid and made some sacred testament.

As we walked back home, we noticed other people looking curiously at us from windows, doors and the street. They seemed eager to vote, too, and soon we began to see more and more groups walking toward the polling site. As soon as we arrived home and the rest of the family saw that we were safe, they decided to go immediately and vote, too.

And so the day went on. We watched the TV, hour by hour, witnessing the great day of the Iraqi people. Old men who couldn't walk going to vote. Simple women, who couldn't read, going to vote. A policeman who stopped a terrorist to save others, sacrificing his life. And the stories of the terrorists, too, who booby-trapped a mentally retarded man and sent him off to die among the crowds.

Who did I vote for? Actually, I left my voting card empty. I was not sure who to vote for in this election; each party has its good and weak points, and most share the same basic aims – to restore security, electricity, fuel and employment. What was important to me, and to many other Iraqis, was the spirit of the challenge. We realize now, after all these months of terrorism, that the collapse of Saddam's regime did not mean the end of the struggle for a better life, but a new struggle for democracy and hope.

Walking around the city later that morning, I met an Iraqi friend who now lives in Hungary. I was quite surprised – especially since he told me that he had come back to Iraq not only to vote (the nearest voting center for him was in Germany), but also to encourage his friends and relatives in Baghdad to do so, too.

Hour by hour, the voting process evolved into a national festival, where a spirit of celebration and challenge replaced anxiety and concern. When night came, we began to hear news reports of attacks that had taken the lives of over 35 people – but also of the heroic actions of policemen, national guard troops and simple citizens who had arrested or killed many of the terrorists (who were primarily our “brother” Arabs), often at the cost of their own lives.

We felt very proud of our people, who proved again that the spirit of life and progress is much stronger than the darkness planned by criminals, ghosts and terrorists. Even on the faces of the old and exhausted we could see the light of joy.

At the end of the day, we were anxious to watch the Arab media – not because we trust networks like Al-Jazeera, but because we were curious to see what the enemies of the new Iraq had to say about our success. We were not surprised to find that Al-Jazeera did not mention the election first, like other channels, but focused instead on the crash of a British military plane. The second news item was about the violence that had killed so many Iraqis that day. When they did mention the election, they seemed disappointed, as if there was nothing to celebrate, as if the voting cards were mixed with the sad blood of a sad people.

We laughed, too, when the BBC reported that these were the first elections Iraq had seen since the collapse of the regime – as if the voting under Saddam could be considered legitimate. No, I wanted to tell the network, these were the first real elections in Iraq’s recent history, and maybe its *entire* history. In the end, though, we didn’t care what the TV reported. Since this war began, we’ve seen the Arab and international media twist the truth about Iraq. We no longer consider them seriously, and we do not let them break our spirit.

Monday was a beautiful sunny day in Baghdad. And those walking in the streets with ink stains on their fingers seemed to me as if they bore vivid testimony to hope and the future of our people.

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All translations from the Arabic by the author

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ⁱ *Inferno*, XII, canto of violent punishment.

ⁱⁱ An old central square in Baghdad.

ⁱⁱⁱ A main street in a poor neighborhood previously called Al Thawra City, now known as Al Sadr City. Al Sadr, a well known cleric, was assassinated by the Saddam regime. The word “Dakhil” means literally “inside”.

^{iv} The name of an old main street in Baghdad. Al Rasheed is the name of the famous Abbaside caliph.