

Buland al-Haydari

Why Didn't They Apologize...?

I decorated the house
I prepared the flowers pots and arranged
The red roses next to the white ones
The blue ones next to the red
And said: I will wait
Everything is prepared for a rendezvous... so why shouldn't I wait... ?

The night is long
My patience with the night is long
The candle is pregnant with a light that will not fade before dawn
Today I am beyond sixty
By three years
So why shouldn't I wait
I have many companions on the road...
Midnight rings in one... two... three
No one
Four... five
No one
Has another rendezvous kept them from mine
Have they all forgotten I'm beyond sixty
By three years...?
That the rendezvous
May not end in a promise?
The candle gathers the remnants of what little time it has left
What remains of a shadow blocking a wall
Of a shadow gathering fire in its wings
And other pale shadows
A question winds around my lip
And sinks deeper into silence
Why didn't they apologize?
Why didn't they apologize?

A deaf table
A head slumped on the deaf table
No one
But the clock strikes past the rendezvous
And the slumped head...

And the candle dissolving bereft of hope

He moved his hands closer to his eyes and dozed off
In bitter silence
At a night that may not question the meaning of dawn.

The Will

Barefoot except for my skin
Like a shoe with a hole it carries me
From a land that was my country
To a land in search of a country for me.

Oh son
Change the color of your shoes
Free your history from my fetters
From the step of a man no longer searching
For a promise
From my eternal death
Who knows...?
You may be born under a sun
Even smaller than my hand is wide
Under a sun
That one day may shine
A promise of dawn rising on my country.

The City Ravaged by Silence

Baghdad, that captive, forgotten
Between the corpse and the nail.

Baghdad was not besieged by the Persian army
Not seduced by a mare
Nor tempted by a hurricane nor touched by fire.

Baghdad died of a wound from within
From a blind silence that paralyzed the tongues of its children

That captive was not a homeland
It was just a prison
Wrapped with black walls and guardrails
It was not a night beyond which we say day lies
Baghdad, that captive, forgotten
And ravaged by the silence

Only a desert inhabited by death
Known only to the stones.

One day it almost became... at a certain time
A thing in secret
A secret restlessness in the stillness of a room
It almost became a promise in two eyes
A vow in blue films
In which we almost lived a dream
Paper boats borne by the air, flowing
Lightly, seeking no anchor,
No mooring on a bank.
We wished it would turn into lightning, revealing desire
but...

-- Listen... listen
And so I listened, and listened closely
But I heard nothing
-- Listen... listen.

And I laughed... Here's the meow of the cat in the neighbor's house
There... A rustle of small leaves
Pay no attention... It's only the meow of the cat
Only the rustle of the trees.

A hand knocks on the door four times
The anxious heart pounds a thousand times
-- Listen... Don't you hear? Don't you see something...?
I see a shadow lurking behind the window
I can almost see in the dark of its eyes... yes
In the darkness of its eyes... yes... my tear-streaked face
For tomorrow the report will be prepared
The grounds will be prepared for killing you inside us, with us, Oh Baghdad
We must confess, we're the corpse and the nail
And you, forgotten between the corpse and the nail.

-- You were awake until the wee hours
-- We were awake until the wee hours... but we
-- What does it mean...? What does it imply...?
On the chair with two broken legs
Above the black table
Near the flickering lantern
There were white papers, yellow papers like pus
There was an open book
Like an exposed secret
And the remains of two pens

What does it mean that you read... that you write
That you stay up until dawn
What does it mean...? What does it imply...?

We will be executed in Baghdad's main square
With a signboard larger than Baghdad on both of our chests
(Understand... you may not be executed.... understand... you may be spared)
You are forbidden to read... to write
To talk... to cry... even to ask
What Baghdad means
What it means to be human or an animal
To be more than a stone forgotten in Baghdad
You are forbidden to be more than the two legs of a harlot
Or the two hands of a pimp.

Baghdad died of a wound inside us... of a wound from within
From a blind silence that paralyzed the tongues of its children
Baghdad was ravaged by the silence
So that we have nothing in it, it has nothing in us... except death
And the corpse and the nail.

"Dialogue of the Colors"
for Leopold Senghor

One evening, oh Senghor
Like all our exiled evenings
In the cold nakedness of our dungeons
Within a short distance
From a blind time that sneaks barefoot
From among
The dust of the road and the edge of my broken window.

The moon, pale as a lie
Yellow as consumption
Sinking in a pond of muddy water
We would ask about the use of a moon
That did not grow even in shadow
What was the use of a time that lies
Like a corpse in a fallow land...
In a deserted homeland
Plagued with the one-eyed sultans of history.

I was... my son was
And a chat that leads to another chat
About a dawn breaking from between your hands

About your glory... what glory, oh Senghor
About your verse... what exquisite verse, oh Senghor
About your home
That opens your eyes on the depths of Senegal
About dark green forests
That spin around a thousand and one questions
About a black beauty
Whose eyes inhabit the sleeplessness of the generations.

I talked to my son
About a sun born in chains
A sun that only shines at night
A sun that wallows in the palms of a child
A sun that creeps under bridges of ants
I talked to my son
About red masks... black
Masks that refuse to take on the color
Of desire in fetters
Or a hurdle
Or a wall
How small is the one who can't tell the secret of any color
Except that of the bearer of false witness.

I heard my son
Screaming: Father... Say no
Spread your two wings as a shadow for us
And a place to pray
For thousands of the slain lie on the road
Pleading for a tear
A candle for the dead
Bleeding in the silence of a woman grieving
For the promise of light
Bursting from the eyes of Mandela
From the eyes of Senghor
Oh Father
Don't extinguish my memory
Don't shortchange my death
Tell the thief who stole my house from my house
My death from my death
Say no... We won't allow ourselves
To be slaughtered
We won't allow
The merchants of black skin to make from my skin chains for me
Sandals from my skin
Say no
My death won't become wheat

But salt
Whirling around the wounds of the killer, the thief, and the renegade
And the tyrant and the aggressor
Wound... after wound
Say no... No, oh my black father
Say no
So I may be born
Say no, oh black god
Oh black slave
Be an eagle so we can worship you.

He remained silent for a long time
I wept for a long time
While I recovered my face from my eye
Son
I know you come
From among the captives of a vanquished time
From among the captives of a time
Hired out to false witnesses
I know you're a bitter Indian fig
A dry chunk of bread
In the cold nakedness of our dungeons
But I
Won't know, my son
In your eyes or my eyes
But in the eyes of Mandela . . . but in the eyes at Senghor
But in a night
That hides all the meanings of light.

So That We Do Not Forget

“On the seventeenth of March 1988 the Iraqi regime shelled the Kurdish town of Halabcha in Iraq with chemical weapons causing the death of thousands.”

Even though my memory grew dim
Even though old age extinguished it
Even though the pus and blood dried by my eyes
I still muse about the house that was ours
Which used to hold out its arms to the light at dawn
A vow will bring it... or a dream
My house had two small windows
I remember they were smaller than eyes
Too small to let the sun cling to the old wood
Or cause universes to grow larger
The courtyard of my house was no bigger than the palm

Of a child
Wherever I walked I tripped over my shadow
My son taught me
The borders of the world in my house are boundless
He taught me to know myself in a drop of dew
He taught me that my house has a path leading to thousands of flower beds
That my house has a door
Trembling through one question and another
Through many nights
And says: come to me
You, coming from any space that was
From any time
He taught me to leave the door of the house wide open
So enter it, you, coming from any space and time
Enter it in safety.

How very small the house was
It was small as a heart
It was large as a heart
Rich with warmth and love
I remember we... were
Like the two windows of my house... like the door of the house
We sleep, our eyes full of green dreams
Of a mountain in Kurdistan
Yesterday
And while the eyes of all your children... Oh, my house
Oh, my country
They were swimming in sunlight
They looked like dew drops from all the narcissus blossoms
And from the flowers
Blew a poisonous wind
And from the eyes of an owl
Which poisoned all your children... Oh, my house... my country
Among those it killed... was my son
Among what it stole... was my shadow
The road to my house became a graveyard extending to thousands of graveyards
In Kurdistan
Nothing but death and the shadow of death
Not a narcissus dreaming of blooming in a flower bed
The villains didn't leave
Only the dead, the ashes of the dead, and the blackness of smoke
But my future
And the reckoning of the dead
And the blood of the slain will chase the face of Satan
From one mirror to another
From a thousand ages to a thousand ages

The rope will coil around the neck of the hangman
Kurdistan will curse your past
Baghdad will disavow your vice
And to the sweet land will return all the beds
Of narcissus and flowers
And my son will be reborn in all the children.

From Behind the Closed Door

The room is dark... as you know it
In a captive country
In a forsaken time
As I know it, a closed panel
A memory searching for a closed door
For the lips of a wound closed
In the darkness
The red stain on the slayer's knife
Sometimes
In the blood of the slain
The screen, this captive country
This deserted country
A wonderful dream that consumes
Our steps
Our blood
A thing that was ours... a thing that inquires about us... within us
But we
Oh my homeland... you the slayer...
You the slain
From what future shall we glance at our past
From what distance in a closed panel
In a closed door
Shall we seek to know your face in our future?
And you are the slayer... the slain is here
And there... blood avenging itself on us... within us.

Death In Four Voices

I.

I am haunted... every night
By the howling of the wolf crouching inside me
I ask: from where... from which desert
Shall I flee from myself...?
I flee from an eye taking aim like an arrow
From an ache

Stretching the length of a back bent like a bow.

I am haunted... every night
By the howling of the wolf
By the corpse of a man searching in penitence
For the meaning of guilt.

II.

Once again... the ticking of the clock awakens me
I open my window, as I do every morning
I hear the voices of street vendors
Announcing
A history for sale and leaders
Their faces glittering like shining shoes
The slain pleading for a graveyard
And captives
And restless
Sins in al-Hajjaj's sermons and al-Saffah's sword
Here I am
Watching black sailor spread his sail at sea
I will journey
I will migrate
Here I am
Gathering between two broken teeth
And two black lips
The deception of years, years, years
I spit it out... I spit it out... I spit it out
But...
Who knows... the black sailor
The sailor
Is but another vision... a deceitful vision.

III.

Exile
A blind memory that wished it had
A homeland in the soil
A homeland, even if its world swelled like a boil
Or a wound
Or a bird that lost its way in the darkness.
A bird that will not find its shadow except in a wilderness
Except
In the dead, exiled beyond the fog-shrouded land.

How great the indignity of exile

How wretched that you don't know yourself as a human
Except
In exile.

IV

Sleep.
You, a man awake like the whips of torturers
You, accursed man
Hiding behind a tiny fig leaf
You, coming from a thousand questions:
Who are you? Who were you? Where did you come from... ?
What doctrines did you learn?
Sleep
All the quarter's dogs are asleep now
And the guard, leaning now on the silence
Of his deaf bullet... he sleeps
The pack of mice sleep
Sleep...
What is there for you in a dawn that will come without a sun
Or in a sun that will come to you from the eyes of a jailor?
What is there for you in a man born in your wound?
Or in the lender's whip
Sleep...
That night I slept... when a voice said: wake up
I said: I'm awake
I woke up... the courtyard of my house was
Full of my blood... Drowning in my blood
I saw my bones swimming in it
And saw the quarter's dogs returning to it
To lick it up
And I saw mice
And the criminal and the lender
And the guard...
The guard still sleeping on the silence
Of his deaf bullet, he will not ask what happened
What was.

How miserable I am, a man... a house... a homeland
That is not born except in death
That does not grow except in oblivion.

Premature Elegy

Two crutches
And two creeping on the road
Deserted except...
Two shadows...
And except for these two
And a feeble light rattling in the darkness
Of two eyes.

She said: the road tired me out and here I am
Sneaking barefoot among the threads of the coffin
And picking up what remains of my days
Of my time...
-- No... no
-- Here I am being consumed between the road and myself
My face does not remember anything about my face
My legs dried up
My eyes went cold
My back is bent under the weight of my remains.

-- No... no
You are still as you were
No, even more beautiful than you were.

She took off her glasses, and turned her eyes
Toward his eyes
She sank into him
Into an eye moistened with death
-- And you, as you are
-- Even lovelier than you were
It is as if the two of us didn't live
Except outside all the years of the earth
And all the ages
Nor did we grow old... neither you
-- And neither you, and the warmth of our hands didn't fade
Two palms wrapped around two palms
For the lie is still larger than death.

The road forked
Shall I say: farewell?
How will I return alone...?
Stop... don't move so far away... don't... no.

Two walking sticks
A sun sinking in the darkness of a deep red sea
And a woman searching for a shadow
And the remains of the shadow of a woman borne by two crutches.

She wept in silence
The silence was large as death.

Translated by Hussein Kadhim and Christopher Merrill