

BAGHDAD MY BELOVED

Salah Al-Hamdani

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH

BY C. DICKSON

An Iraqi poet, actor, and playwright, Salah Al-Hamdani was born in Baghdad in 1951. He has been living in exile in France for thirty years, voicing both his opposition to the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, his wars, and to the Anglo-American occupation. He began writing as a political prisoner in his early twenties. He is the author of numerous literary works, including tales, short stories, and poems in Arabic and in French. Some of his texts were published in Arabic in clandestine journals in Iraq during the dictatorship. Al-Hamdani assisted Saad Salman in writing the dialogues for his film Baghdad On/Off.

Al-Hamdani's poetry takes us to the banks of the Euphrates, upon which his native Baghdad stands. The author once confided in his "The Beginning of Words":

I once found it difficult to accept exile far from Iraq. Now, [by my wife's side], I appreciate the waiting and the separation. I have tried to surmount each step of the loneliness. Still be alive here, with nothing from back there. Live here in a foreign land, awkwardly perhaps,

but live. Suddenly, over by the door standing ajar on the narrative, on the screams of men, on the smells of childhood, a whip lashes across my throat. How might I emerge on the other side of the book? I don't want to flee. Simply retrace the days and remember with the soul of a child . . .

In my homeland people used to go to the mosque regularly, they lined up before Allah and said hello to the mother of the man they'd executed the day before with their bare hands. They fed on lies, they practiced Ramadan during the day and got drunk at night. Everything said regarding the sacred book was very refined. So was the food. The dead and the victims were the color of the Eastern sands.

"Baghdad My Beloved" was written in 2003. It echoes the author's familiar themes of exile and opposition to the American occupation of Iraq.

You needn't crucify yourself
 either on the edge of a page
 of history that is not your own,
 or to atone for the dead born of your suffering
 for nowhere is there a cry to soothe your pain.

You needn't crucify yourself on the banks of the bloody
 torrents
 that gush from your body,
 as the Euphrates bares the secrets of its soul
 at the dawn of a new defeat.

I know,
no wound can justify war.

You needn't crucify yourself at the end of day,
when you have not concluded your prayers
over the fallen palms
for there can be no honorable killer.

You needn't crucify yourself for the ashes of disaster
for the tombs of your Gods,
or for the beliefs of a dying humanity.

Baghdad, my beloved,
neither father, nor son, nor God,
no prophet crowned by the church will save your soul,
neither the one from Mecca,
nor the prophet of those who refuse
to share olive branches in Palestine.

Here is my war notebook
years of exile
folded into a suitcase;
abandoned far too long to the dreams of the condemned.

Here is my share of victims
my share of moon
my harvest of emptiness
my share of dust, of words, and of cries.

Here is my sorrow
like a comma barring off an ink mark.

Baghdad, my beloved,
I was squatting in a corner of the page
Sheltered from barren days
far from bloody rivers
that swept away the names of the dead
and people's silence.

Baghdad, my beloved
sitting like a Bedouin in a mirage
stretched along my shores, I cherished my own death shroud
far from the cross, from the hand of Fatma
and the star of David
far from their books, from their wars
wandering through the sandy dunes
from the wasteland to the town
I drag my body from season to season
and you from the couch to the mirror,
from my bedroom to the street
between my writing and my loneliness
far from their cemeteries,
from their martyrs, from their morgues.

Baghdad, my beloved,
you did not stand shivering in the doorway of the ruined days,
a whole civilization geared to killing
has robbed you of your innocence.
Baghdad, you who never submitted to Saddam, the brute
you have no reason to groan
at the simple revelation of that iron fist
those who busy themselves about your agonizing body,
those "liberators," become his henchmen.

Baghdad, my aching heart,
my father, a laborer, never knew joy
my mother lost her youth in the mirror
and the sole witness to my
first heartbroken sobs upon your breast
is the blowing sand,
the starry sky and God's gaze as prayer is being called.

Madinat al-Salam
city of peace
love in the essence of the written word.

How I wish today
that man had never discovered fire
and I curse him for tramping on through his own deafening din.

The earth that gave me life is being put to death today
oh! mother! Let me return to your flesh
So I might listen to the beating of your soul
and drink in the murmur of your breath.

March 25, 2003