

ADNAN AL-SAYEGH



# THE DELETED PART

EXILED WRITERS INK



# **The Deleted Part**

**By Adnan al-Sayegh**

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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 14<sup>th</sup> January 1993





.....  
- 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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 10<sup>th</sup> 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 10<sup>th</sup> 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-Hallaj<sup>1</sup>

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 10<sup>th</sup> 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'<sup>2</sup>

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 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 11<sup>th</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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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