

DAVIDSON COLLEGE

THE FIRST EMBER AND A MIND'S PLIGHT: TRANSLATED WORKS OF YA'AQUB

BILBUL (YAAKOV LEV)

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO

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The First Ember & a Mind's Plight: Selected Short Stories and Sonnets in Arabic and Hebrew

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The stories and poems herein compose an American English translation of the collection published in 2006, not including the story *Surat Tabaq al-Asl*. The translator named herein after retains no rights whatsoever to the original work.

Translated by Arielle Korman

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Introduction

When I picture Ya'aqub Bilbul, he is sitting in his room in his parents' home. It is 1937 and Bilbul is seventeen. A copy of Henri Bergson's "L'évolution Créatrice" lies open before him. He taps his pen on his desk. Through his window, he looks out at the city. There are cars, people selling things, people baking bread, children running in the streets. Bits of conversation travel up from down below. Many come in Jewish accents, with soft r's and a sprinkling of Hebrew words. They come in other accents too, Muslim and Christian, the occasional Kurdish phrase from the north.

I wish I could see his Baghdad. I wish I could hear the voices he would have listened to from his window. It is 2017. For my entire life, the thought of travel to Iraq for the average American has been uncommon. Traveling to specifically Jewish Baghdad is not only unlikely, but also impossible. To really see thriving Jewish life in the city, one would have to travel not only past borders, through space, but also through time, more than sixty years to be precise.

Jewish Baghdad may be gone but remnants of it still exist, in the literature of lives of those who knew it. Jews who lived in Baghdad, though now often elderly, are the living link between it and the present. I want to share an anecdote from my time spent with one such person. The moment in question was one in which I felt a trace of this Baghdad that was, in which Bilbul lived and wrote his stories, veritable love letters to his city and country.

One evening during my year in Israel, I found myself in a small grocery shop in East Jerusalem. I had traveled there with Shireen, an administrative assistant and Dr. Shmuel Moreh, professor emeritus at Hebrew University and president of the organization that published Bilbul's stories. When Shireen left to run some errands, Moreh, born Mu'Allem, began to wander the

store's aisles at a glacial pace. Light from the back of the store shone upon the fruits and vegetables that lined the walls nearly to the ceiling, and upon his silhouette as he breathed in the scent of fresh apricots.

From the front of the store, a woman called to him. "*Ustaz Moreh!*" As it turned out, many years ago, she had studied Arabic Literature with him at the university. Shortly afterwards, she had given birth to a child. "How lucky to see you," she said. "My daughter is getting married! You'll be there?" Moreh introduced me to the woman as the "American student, also Jewish" and turned to collect something from another aisle. The woman smiled, asked me about my studies in Arabic, and within a few moments I too had been invited to this wedding. Moreh returned with a bag full of green almonds, fresh, sour, and almost like peaches in their fuzzy encasings. He paid for the bag and the cashier told me they were the best all week. Moreh handed me the bag.

Dr. Moreh is proudly Jewish and proudly Israeli. The evening before our excursion to the grocery store, he had spoken before the Israeli Knesset. Though he teaches and studies Arabic literature, he uses only his Hebrew name, Moreh, as opposed to Mu'Allem. He lives in a predominantly Jewish suburb of Jerusalem with his Finnish wife. He did not raise his children speaking Arabic. Yet the world he lives in remains one in which Arabic plays a central role. He does all his shopping in East Jerusalem.

In the grocery store, I felt something simultaneously sad and sublime. I felt how normal it was for Moreh to exist in an Arabic-speaking space, how beloved he was by his student, how unafraid he was to be both Jewish and Iraqi. Outside the door of the grocery store, Moreh and his student live different lives, with different prejudices affecting them. Out of the two of them, Moreh is the one ultimately aligned with the power in the region. Their friendly interaction in

Arabic did not change anything about the reality of inequality. Still, there was something so simple and sweet about being in that store. This was simply Moreh's shopping routine. Perhaps Jerusalemites would say these interactions are more common than I think. Yet I knew Jews did not frequent this neighborhood and knew people who would be worried if they knew where I was.

Iraq was never totally free of prejudice, against Jews, Christians, Kurds, Shi'as, Yazidis, or any other group. Yet at times there was a normalcy and rhythm to life that my memory of the grocery store seems to call to. Later in a discussion of Iraqi-Jewish literature, Moreh spoke about "*hanin*," the Arabic word for longing or nostalgia, and how it characterized nearly all literature of Iraqi Jews in Israel.

Ya'aqub Bilbul wrote the stories included in this collection before Jews immigrated *en masse* from Iraq to Israel. His work is a primary source from a moment in Iraqi and Jewish history when emigration to the State of Israel was but a fringe consideration for Jews. At the time of his writing, Bilbul was not aware that in less than fifteen years, he would be forced to leave the land he so loved. His world, evident through the stories and poems he wrote, appears educated, pluralistic, largely secular, proudly Iraqi, Jewish, and Arabic-speaking. It is this world for which many other Iraqi-Jewish authors have pined. In translating these stories and poems, I intend to present to an English-speaking audience a window into his world.¹ It will be an incomplete glimpse, refracted in translation, time, and place. Still, it will be an attempt to open a window to an Arabic-speaking Jewish world that felt, to its residents, as natural as shopping for fruit.

¹ David Damrosch, "What is world Literature Today?" *World Literature Today* 77, No. 1 (2003) 9. Damrosch lists serving as a "window to a foreign world" as a possible function of translation.

Framing: Contemporary Conceptions of Arabs and Jews in the Middle East

To frame the timeliness and significance of studying Iraqi-Jewish literature, I find it necessary to begin not in Iraq but in Israel. Iraq had been home to Jews (originally of the Judean tribe) since the sixth century BCE, yet in the particular time in which I am translating these stories, the Jewish and Arabic-speaking worlds converge mostly in Israel/Palestine.²

Today the words “Arab” and “Jew” seem to exist at diametrically opposed poles. One pole is Israel, the Jewish state, associated with the U.S. and the Western world. The other is Palestine and its surrounding Arab world. Some Arabic speakers may use the word “Jews,” as a stand-in for “Israel” or “Israelis.” Based on this language, resentment towards Israel seems to be resentment for Jews. Among Israeli Jews, the word “Arab” can be used pejoratively and at the very least connotes otherness. An Israeli pop song entitled “The Sticker Song” quotes a variety of bumper stickers one might see around the country, including one which states, “now there are no Arabs, there are no attacks.”³ This statement references the fact that the construction of the separation wall during the second intifada lessened the number of Palestinians able to come into Israel proper. Still, it erases Palestinians living within Israel’s borders, some of whom identify as both Arab and Israeli.

The statement also erases the possibility that one can be both Arab and Jewish. Over fifty percent of Israeli Jews are at least partially descended from Arabic-speakers, long-time residents of Arab countries. There is some, and growing, awareness in Israel of the ambiguity between these terms. In her book *Poetic Trespass: Writing Between Hebrew and Arabic in*

² Regina Randhofer, “By the Rivers of Babylon: Echoes of the Babylonian past in the Musical Heritage of the Iraqi Jewish Diaspora,” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 13, No. 1 (2004): 22.

³ Hadag Nachash, “The Sticker Song,” Anana/Head Arzi, 2004.

Israel/Palestine, Lital Levy illustrates the Arab Jewish identity by including a picture of a tapestry by the Israeli artist Haim Maor. Maor embroiders the Arabic words “ana min al-Yahud,” “I am of the Jews,” on a piece of fabric.⁴ The choice to write this statement in Arabic subverts the perceived dichotomy between Arab and Jew.

More popular media has also begun to address this concept. In an episode of the Israeli comedy series “Ha-Yehudim Ba’im,” “the Jews are Coming,” a Jewish-Israeli soldier holds a gun to a new Druze recruit to the army, accusing him of being Arab. The Druze soldier then asks the Jewish soldier whose last name is Turgeman, “Turgeman, where are your parents from?” Turgeman replies, “My father is from Morocco and my mother is Egyptian.” The Druze soldier then furrows his brow and says, “So aren’t you too a kind of Arab?” The Jewish soldier suddenly places his hands above his head in surrender. The clip ends as Turgeman, disarmed, makes gun gestures with his hands, for a split second wondering if he should shoot himself.⁵ Exploring the possibilities of “Arabness” and “Jewishness” existing in the same body is no longer a strictly fringe endeavor. Still, it is by no means mainstream, and “Ha-Yehudim Ba’im” often plays on stereotypes about so-called Mizrahim or Jews with heritage in the Arab world. Characters speak in an Ashkenazi accent unless they specifically are depicting Mizrahim.

Exploring overlapping identities of “Arab” and “Jew” to the extent of celebrating Arab culture by that name or celebrating Arabic remains subversive. To take on the label of “Arab Jew” makes a strong statement. Yet Arabs and Jews have interacted in countless other places and contexts. Particularly, in Iraq in the Twentieth Century, these labels were in flux. While a stark

⁴ Lital Levy, *Poetic Trespasses: Writing Between Hebrew and Arabic in Israel/Palestine* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 268.

⁵ *Ha-Yehudim Ba’im*, Season 2 Episode 2 “Hayyal ha-Druzi ha-Rishon.” Directed by Kobi Habiah, aired on February 19 2015 on the Israeli Broadcast Network.

dichotomy exists today, not many years ago and not far away, all these labels: Iraqi, Jewish, Arab, etc. could exist simultaneously.

Before delving into the history of Jews in Iraq and their place in discussion of Arab-Jewish relations, I want to clarify an intention. Ella Shohat, a prominent Arab-Jewish writer and scholar at New York University warns, when discussing Arab Jews, of the “charmingly exotic possibilities of such a syncretic identity.”⁶ If it seems antithetical to be both Arab and Jewish, then to be so seems like a pro-peace revelation. Yet in her comment, Shohat points to a crucial aspect of Arab-Jewish identities: their normalcy. While readers should remember how radical it can be to identify as an Arab Jew, they should avoid exoticization and remember how natural this identity is to many. When Yaakov Lev wrote these stories, he did not find his identity as an Arab, a Jew, or an Iraqi, to be in contradiction or radical at all. He was not, to borrow another phrase from Shohat, a “tragic anomaly.”⁷ Indeed, the history of Jews in Iraq and in the Arab world was thousands of years old. There was a long tradition to which Lev and Shohat both connect.



⁶ Ella Habiba Shohat, “Dislocated Identities: Reflections of an Arab Jew,” *Movement Research* no. 5 (1992): 8.

⁷ *ibid.*

Photograph by the Author of the Introduction

The History of Jews in Iraq and the Arab World

Jews were active in the Arabic language before the birth of Muhammad in the sixth century and the spread of Islam in the seventh century. The sixth century writings of Jewish pre-Islamic poet al-Sammaw'al ibn 'Adiya helped set the precedent for the Arabic epic.⁸ More broadly in the Arab world, Jewish intellectuals reached a peak of engagement with the Arabic in al-Andalus, a name referring to Islamic Spain between the eighth and fifteenth centuries.⁹ The Andalusian period was characterized by much overlap between Islam and Judaism in terms of religious practice and mysticism and also saw overlap and exchange in literary thought and poetry. Most famously, Maimonides lived in Cordoba and wrote in Arabic, interacting with Muslim scholars that surrounded him.

Maimonides remains one of the most well-known thinkers in all of Jewish history. In Cordoba today, there is a statue in the old Jewish quarter of Maimonides dressed in Moorish garb. The visual of Maimonides in a turban and long robes, while potentially bringing to mind Orientalist portrayals of North African people, also further emphasizes the fact that Maimonides existed squarely in an Islamic, Arab world.

In Mesopotamia, Jews had been a presence for thousands of years.¹⁰ Indeed, ancient figures such as Ezra, Daniel, and Ezekiel are said to have lived and written in this region.¹¹ In the

⁸ Coeli Fitzpatrick and Adam Hani Walker, *Muhammad in History, Thought, and Culture: An Encyclopedia of the Prophet of God*, Edition 1, s.v. "Al-Samaw'al ibn 'Adiya," Santa Barbara, ABC-CLIO, LLC 2014, 54.

⁹ Reuven Snir, "My Adherence to the Creed of Moses Has Not Diminished My Love for Muhammad's Nation": The Emergence and Demise of Iraqi Jewish Literary Modern Culture" *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 98, no. 1 (2008): 63.

¹⁰ Regina Randhofer, "By the Rivers of Babylon: Echoes of the Babylonian past in the Musical Heritage of the Iraqi Jewish Diaspora," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 13, No. 1 (2004): 23.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

6th Century BCE when Babylonian forces destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem, a large group of Judean Jews was exiled to Babylon.¹² Babylon became a major center for Jewish learning. The Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud) was edited there from 550-600 CE and remains one of the central legal documents in the Jewish canon.¹³ Babylon persisted as this center of Jewish life until the eleventh century, when under Ottoman rule the community suffered and sought refuge in Spain. Still, a Jewish community remained in Iraq until the modern period, increasingly concentrated in Baghdad.

Iraqi Jews in the 20th Century

An Ottoman census report of Baghdad in 1917 revealed that of its 202,000 residents, 80,000 were Jewish.¹⁴ Iraqi-Jewish writer and scholar Nissim Rejwan puts this number into context when he remembers the city of his early to mid- twentieth century youth as "Jewish."¹⁵ To put what it means to be a "Jewish" city in context, Rejwan compares his memory of Baghdad to contemporary New York City.¹⁶ In New York, it is common to hear Yiddish words sprinkled into conversation regardless of whether one speaks to Jews or non-Jews. Jerry Seinfeld and Woody Allen both come from New York. There is a sense that Jewishness is part of the city's identity.

In many ways, Jews were quite prosperous during the Ottoman period before independence in 1921 (when the modern state of Iraq was founded under King Faisal I) and

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Jack N. Lightstone. "The Rhetoric of the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud: From Rabbinic Priestly Scribes to Scholastic Rabbis," *Historical Reflections/ Réflexions Historiques* 21, No. 1 (1995): 77.

¹⁴ James Glanz and Irit Pazner Garshowitz, "In Israel, Iraqi Jews Reflect on Baghdad Heritage," *New York Times*, April 27, 2016, final edition.

¹⁵ in Snir, 73.

¹⁶ Ibid.

during the British period before 1932. Jews had the advantage of being connected with other communities, namely Jewish communities, in various regions with which Iraq did trade.¹⁷

Another reason for the Jewish community's rise and success during this period was its commitment to schooling, with many new schools having emerged by 1929.¹⁸ A watershed moment in Iraqi-Jewish history was the establishment of the Alliance school by the Alliance Israelite Universelle where Hebrew, Arabic, and French were taught.¹⁹

Being educated and increasingly prosperous served a purpose for the Jewish community beyond mere enjoyment. These years, soon after Ottoman and British rule, were a moment in which the very notion of "Arabness" was being developed. Thinkers from all walks of life were contemplating the question of nationalism: whether it should be Pan-Arab or place-specific. Despite having significant populations in important areas of Iraq, Jews remained a minority in several senses of the word. Their identity, much like that of Kurds or Shi'a Muslims, tagged them as non-normative. It was wise for Jews to adopt the language of Arab nationalism but try to fit themselves within it.²⁰ They advocated for a nationalism based on Iraqi borders, not ethnicity.²¹ Some Jewish intellectuals started to use the phrase "Arab Jew" during this period.²² During British rule and afterwards, Jews sought to participate in government, with political leaders such as Sir Yehezkel Sassoon and Menachem Daniel, senator from 1925-32.

In politics and schooling, mastery of the Arabic language was a ticket to leadership and influence. Dr. Moreh explained that the level of Arabic taught at Jewish schools such as the

¹⁷ Moshe Gat, "The Socioeconomic Patterns of Iraqi Jewry in the Twentieth Century." *Jewish Political Studies Review* 10, No. 1-2 (1998): 24.

¹⁸ Orit Bashkin, *New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2012), 7.

¹⁹ Gat, 26.

²⁰ Bashkin, 4.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid, 2.

Alliance or the Shammash school, which Bilbul attended, was extremely high. Jews were involved in writing to participate in mainstream culture and even to push the boundaries of what the Arabic language could achieve. Jewish writers such as Anwar Shaul and Murad Mikhail continued to make developments in Arabic story writing, with Mikhail writing one of the first known Arabic short stories in 1922.²³ Yaakov Lev, then Ya'aqub Bibul, was a part of this wave of Jewish thinkers who considered himself to be part of the Arabic literary tradition and, wisely, experimented with techniques within the framework of the Arab world.

To an extent more profound than certain narratives would suggest, Zionism was unpopular among the Jewish community until 1947, the year the Partition Plan was proposed.²⁴ It is important to note, as well, that Nazi influence in the Iraqi government planted or sowed seeds of distrust of Jews in the 1930's, leading to a communally traumatic pogrom known as the Farhud. Yet still, Palestine was not quite the attractive metropolis of Baghdad, and most Jews at the time preferred to stay in Iraq and develop a nationalism there. Earlier in the 1920's, some few bourgeois Jews had thought settling Palestine would lead to better cooperation between Jews and the Arab world, and that Arabic-speaking Jews could be a part of this process.²⁵ Still, this position was incompatible with the upward mobility many Jews had been feeling in the 20th Century. In the Iraqi-Jewish community, one not known for having any major rifts, Zionism was a fringe position.²⁶

Few could have seen what was in store for Jews in the following ten years. It is important to recognize that before this time, Jews were only one of several minority groups in Iraq. Yet a difference for the Jewish community was the presence of Israel. The State and its relations with

²³ Rejwan, xv.

²⁴ Bashkin, 5-6.

²⁵ Ibid, 12.

²⁶ Gat, 19.

its neighbors was challenging relations between Iraq and its Jewish population, yet as discussed, Zionism was not popular at the time. In 1948, Israel declared independence. Suspicion of all minorities such as Kurds and Shiites was on the rise, but Israel was an existing country one could send Jews to.²⁷ Expelling them was a move by the government to appease the masses in a time of political turmoil.²⁸ At first Jews had not been allowed to emigrate, but in 1949, “Law no. 1” permitted Jews to leave as long as they renounced Iraqi citizenship.²⁹ A Jewish presence in Mesopotamia 3000 years old had quite suddenly disappeared, headed for a new and radically different life in Israel. Amid that migration was Ya'aqub Bilbul, soon to become Yaakov Lev.

Ya'aqub Bilbul/Yaakov Lev

Ya'aqub Bilbul was born in Baghdad in 1919, where he lived most of his life until immigrating to Israel in 1951. He attended the Shammash school, a well-respected boys' school with a focus on learning languages.³⁰ From the age of sixteen, he took an interest in poetry, inspired both by Arabic and by Western literature.³¹

Before the age of twenty, Bilbul published the poems featured in this collection in a political newspaper called al-'Alm.³² He was deeply ingrained in Iraqi political culture and political culture in the Arab world, publishing and translating articles in papers such as *al-Bilad*,

²⁷ Bashkin, 13.

²⁸ Stacy E. Holden, *A Documentary History of Modern Iraq* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida 2012), 125.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Miklif Hamad Mudhi, “The Origin and Development of the Iraqi-Jewish Short Story from 1922 1972” (PhD diss., University of Exeter 1988) 145.

³¹ Lilian Dabby-Joury, “The Writer and Poet Ya’acov Lev (Balbul)” in Lev, iv.

³² Lev, 80.

al-Risala, and *Sawt al-Ahli*.³³ Bilbul wrote the stories presented here in 1937 and published them in Baghdad in 1938.

While the collection pushed boundaries in the realm of Modern Arabic literature, it received mixed criticism. In an interview, prominent Iraqi-Israeli writer Yitzhak Bar-Moshe comment on Bilbul's non-credible and unoriginal plotting.³⁴ Others targeted his weakness in characterization.³⁵ Certainly, the stories and poems featured here often leave the reader with more questions than answers. All three stories end with a cliffhanger and can feel unsatisfying to read.

Weakness of plot and insufficiently developed characters detract from the experience of reading Bilbul's work, yet it is important to put them in the context of writing at the time. Firstly, the practice of editing in the publishing process in Iraq only became standardized in the 1940's.³⁶ Secondly, Bilbul himself acknowledged the simplicity of his work as he considered these works to be belletristic in nature. They focused more on aestheticism than real driving plot or character development, though little writing if any seems to exist praising him for achievements in belles-lettres.³⁷ Instead, scholars have lauded how he pushed boundaries in the genre of the Iraqi short story, writing realistic depictions of life in Iraq.³⁸ According to Eli Amir, even those most critical of Bilbul's writing style consider him to be one of the most important writers of short fiction in Iraq between the 1920's and 1950's.³⁹ In 2013 Nabil 'abd al-Amir al-Rabi'I and the Iraqi literary

³³ Lillian Dabby-Joury in Lev, v.

³⁴ Nancy E. Berg, *Exile from Exile: Israeli Writers from Iraq* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 36.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Berg, 62.

³⁷ Berg, 35.

³⁸ Mudhi, 145.

³⁹ Berg, 36.

website al Hewar al-Mutmaden published an article about Bilbul, affirming his contributions to Iraqi social realism.⁴⁰ The article went on to describe other literary contributions of Iraqi Jews.

Despite his literary contributions, Bilbul left Iraq and the Arabic-speaking world before he had reached full maturity as a writer and thinker. He never published new stories or poems after that. Few of his journalistic writings remain, only pieces quoted in articles here and there. From the perspective of a researcher, it is unclear how great his influence actually was on Arabic literature, or more accurately, could have been.

Bilbul changed his name to “Lev” when he finally immigrated to Israel. His original surname referred to a local bird, but meant “confusion” in Hebrew. “Lev” in Hebrew means “heart.” In this collection, I refer to him as Bilbul, the name he used while in Iraq. There is something beautiful to Bilbul’s work, cliffhanger endings and all. It is the work of a man in love with his homeland. It is a note in the swan song of Jewish life in Iraq. It is the earnest work of a young person whose literary vision never had room to grow.

Translator’s Note

I took an interest in stories of Iraqi Jews after reading Lital Levy’s *Poetic Trespass: Writing Between Hebrew and Arabic in Israel/Palestine*. Speaking of Arab Jews, Levy revealed an identity and people that seemed to challenge what both labels could entail. Myself a non-Ashkenazi-passing Jew, I had long been interested in Jewish stories that did not fit dominant narratives in the community. As I became more interested in Arabic and then translation, I decided to try my hand at a translation from Arabic to English. Stories by Iraqi Jews emerged as

⁴⁰ Nabil ‘abd- al Amir al-Rabi’i, “Ya’aqub Bilbul: al-Adib Alathi Waqaf fi Tali’a al-Adaba al-‘Iraqin al-Waq’in Bidayat al-Qaran al-‘Ashrin” Al-Hewar, April 15, 2013, accessed February 25, 2017, <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=354512>.

a viable possibility. Aware of my own biases, I felt averse to translating Palestinian work as someone who identifies publicly as Jewish, aligning to some extent with the dominant power in Israel/Palestine. A translator need not have lived the same experience as the author of the source work, yet true empathy, enough to attempt translation, takes time to develop.

After spending around a year in Haifa studying Arabic and Hebrew, I had begun to visit Jerusalem and Dr. Shmuel Moreh, a professor emeritus of Arabic literature at Hebrew University. I knew of Moreh from my preliminary research on the life of Samir Naqqash, a former student of his and the last known Iraqi-Jewish writer to publish exclusively in Arabic. As it turned out, it seemed Moreh was connected or had been connected to all the major Iraqi-Israeli writers both living and dead. Independently and as president of the Association of Jewish Academics from Iraq, he had published works in Arabic by these writers, circulated in Israel.

I continue to take great interest in the lives and stories of Arabic-speaking Jews in Israel. A great many works remain, many of which reside in Dr. Moreh's office, which will hopefully be studied and translated. Still, I also wanted to understand more about the world that had been lost. I came across this collection of poems and stories by Ya'aqub Bilbul in a dusty box at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. I found the juxtaposition of Hebrew and Arabic, facing one another as equals, to be incredibly powerful, though as both Hebrew and Arabic are read right to left, the Arabic comes first. As I began to read the stories, I also noticed something striking: Bilbul was seventeen years old when the stories in "The First Ember" were published. Myself only twenty-one years old, I felt a connection to the idealistic spirit and earnest philosophical musings of a young, educated person.

In "Revolution of the Ignorant," Bilbul writes about a main character, Wa'il, starkly different from himself. Wa'il is Bedouin, uneducated, older and married to several wives. The

story shows Wa'il trying to figure out, in his terms, how the radio works. Through the story, Bilbul demonstrates an awareness of class-based and ethnicity-based issues in his society, even if the narrator's tone comes across as slightly and accidentally condescending towards the character. In "The Vision," Bilbul's narrator is closer in age and education level to himself, and this story allows itself to delve into deep philosophical musings that are dense at times and tender at others. In "The Return," Bilbul presents a narrator who, in search of fame and fortune, abandons his family and city. This story is more overtly nationalist than the others, with "the return" referring to the protagonist's inevitable return to his homeland.

Ya'aqub Bilbul's education, political perspectives, and literary interests were typical of the Jewish community in Baghdad during the 1930's. Indeed, with my translation, my goal is to present a picture of him that reflects his idealism and how natural it was that he, with his multiple identities, a *mélange* of Eastern and Western cultural influences, and education, existed naturally in Iraq. I have been met with some amazement when I have told those unaware of this community about the topic of my project. Indeed, in a world where "Jew" and "Arab," and certainly "Baghdad" and "the West" are widely seen as dichotomous, this person and his community complicated and complicate definitions. Still, nothing about Bilbul was particularly out of the ordinary in his community. Rather, I want the cosmopolitan Baghdad and the multiethnic Mediterranean world portrayed in Bilbul's stories to strike the English-speaking reader as oddly relatable.

To this end, I have made several major choices in my translation, which I would like to share. Arabic is a diglossic language, meaning its written and spoken forms are, in effect, different languages. The two share many words. Formal Arabic, *fusha*, and Modern Standard Arabic are terms that refer to the high register of the language. *Fusha* is shared as a literary

tongue throughout the Arabic-speaking world. It can be found in books, the news, and most written work. When speaking in formal settings, Arabic-speakers might speak in *fusha* or a mixture of *fusha* and *ammiyah*, their regional dialect. Regional dialect can differ even from city to city and some dialects are mutually incomprehensible. Almost all conversation occurs in *ammiyah*. The difference from *fusha* to *ammiyah* could be as stark as the comparison of Victorian British English and twentieth century rural Appalachian English. Thus, a translator from Arabic is met with a challenge. To match the high, educated register, beauty and wide vocabulary of *fusha*, a translator of any Arabic text could reasonably render a translation only in the highest English. This way, a reader of the translated work could maintain awareness of the text's formal origin.

In my translation, I do not ignore that Bilbul's stories and poems are written with exquisite *fusha*. Indeed, he demonstrates familiarity with extremely complicated classical and religious texts with his use of certain words. That the texts are written in *fusha* is significant in that Lev was educated in this form of the language. Bilbul, as a narrator, should come across as educated. Thus, I do not shy away from certain complex English words. Still, I have chosen to translate the text in an English accessible to the average educated reader of English. Though Bilbul wrote in an elevated formal style, his stories and poems would have been accessible to speakers of many dialects, and thus accessibility is central to their nature. In Baghdad alone, Jews, Muslims, and Christians often spoke with different dialects. I have tried to preserve the dignity of Bilbul's language, using a wide English vocabulary to reflect his style, but believe an English version of his writings should be somewhat more accessible than some translations of *fusha* may be.

One feature of *fusha* and Arabic fiction, which it is useful to note, is the tendency to include multiple adjectives to describe phenomena or feelings. For example, in *fusha*, it would be good style to say something to the effect of “I felt an excruciating and painful pang.” In English, it would be better style to use only one of these adjectives, and indeed it would be more poetic to substitute them for more affective language and literary devices such as metaphor. *Fusha* possesses such an extensive vocabulary that, often, there is an adjective that quite accurately depicts the feeling the author intended. Famously, there are over fourteen words for “love” in *fusha* alone. Sometimes, in my translation, I have edited lines where this kind of repetition occurs by including just one word to describe a character’s feeling. I have tried, in my word choice throughout surrounding paragraphs, to preserve the feeling of these edited words. In order to create a readable text in English that preserves the quality of Bilbul’s writing, I have chosen to adapt somewhat to English conventions that place a higher value upon brevity.

Another consideration in my translation has been which regional dialect of English to choose. The kind of academic and literary English in which Bilbul would have been educated would have been British. Thus, a convincing argument could be made for translating his works using British words, phrasing, and spelling. Still, as is especially apparent in his story “The Return,” Bilbul believed in liberation from British colonialism. British influence is apparent in his work, such as his choice to write sonnets in Arabic, yet I did not want to impose too much British influence upon his work, especially when he was decidedly writing in Arabic and not English or even French, though he spoke all these languages. A more American or global English is more removed from British rule in Iraq and thus, I believe, a more appropriate and less distracting kind of English to employ. I have tried to avoid using too many American regional

colloquialisms, however, wanting to clearly place the action in Bilbul's story in Iraq and the Mediterranean/Middle East.

With regards to proper nouns, I have made certain choices worth explaining. In translating names of places, I have chosen to employ standard English spelling. Thus, al-'Iraq is "Iraq," "Astanba" is "Istanbul," and "Yunan" is "Greece." Both methods, using the transliterated Arabic in italics, and using the English names, can help place a text clearly in the East. Using the original Arabic is a reminder that the world of the text is not English-speaking. Still, in using the English word, I intend to constantly remind the reader, in terms he or she may recognize, the geography of Bilbul's world. Greece, Turkey, and Iraq were all parts of this educated figure's geographic region and the place of his intellectual life and that of his characters. I want the reader to know that the place in which Yusuf, the protagonist of the story "The Return," wishes to study, is Istanbul and not somewhere in the West. Still, in an effort not to overly appropriate the text, I have transliterated all names of people and also kept certain words in italicized Arabic. A short glossary is included in the back of this book for reference. I intend these choices to create a balance in which the reader is plainly aware that the text exists in Arabic and that Bilbul's world is the East.

I intend Lev's narrative voice to be recognizable to educated English-speakers as that of a young, educated thinker. The protagonist of the story "The Dream" contemplates philosophy and the nature of dreams. In "Revolution of the Ignorant," one can see in the narrator an awareness of ethnic and class-based inequality, though he seems to "other" his subject in a way that comes across as antiquated now. As a college student, only slightly older than Bilbul was when he wrote these stories, I recognize his flawed but well-intentioned foray into understanding nationalism, class, colonialism, history, and more.

I have tried to remain faithful to the text in terms of content, particularly character description and plot, so that readers may get a true sense of some of the themes Bilbul dealt with. Though I have worked to create a smooth English rendition of the stories, I have considered staying close to the text as important for the stories. In translating Bilbul's poems, I have made slightly different choices. The poetry section of the collection includes an introduction by Bilbul himself in which he explains why he has chosen to write sonnets in Arabic. In it, he expresses that his purpose in these poems has not been to produce the most descriptive images or language.⁴¹ Rather, he opts to use clear imagery and symbolism that raises philosophical questions.

Here, Bilbul also explains that French-Jewish philosopher Henri Bergson's *L'Évolution créatrice* or "Creative Evolution" significantly influenced his poetry.⁴² Bergson, who won the Nobel Prize for his Anti-Darwinian work, believed that a so-called vital impulse (*élan vital*) rather than the complex mechanism of Darwinism drove species to evolve.⁴³ One can see evidence of "vital impulse" in the subjects of his poems. They strive to connect with one another (see "The Sponge," "With a Tree," and "The Sleeping Baby.") They find meaning and a drive to live in these connections rather than in technology or more apparent representations of progress (see "In My World").

In his introduction, Bilbul also speaks of his preferred form, the sonnet.⁴⁴ He says the topics it is often associated with are ideal for presenting philosophical questions.⁴⁵ His choice to use the form of the sonnet is also significant in that he was one of the first writers to attempt writing sonnets in Arabic. In translating these pieces, I felt it was necessary to maintain the form

⁴¹ Lev, 80.

⁴² Lev, 80.

⁴³ Henri Bergson, *L'Évolution créatrice*, Ebook (Les Échos du Marquis, 2013), 67.

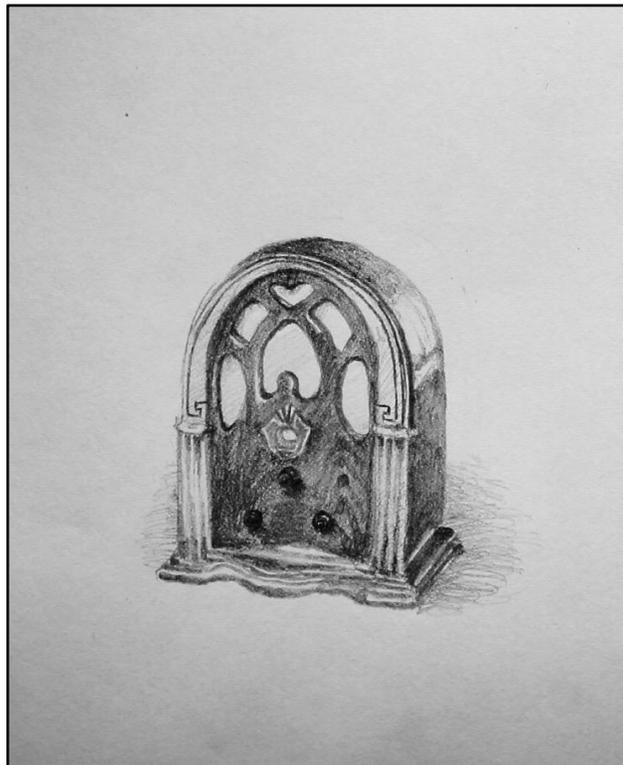
⁴⁴ Lev, 80.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

at the expense of some of the language and phrasing but not the content or imagery. Thus, these translations deviate more from the original than the stories do. Juxtaposing the poems and stories, I hope to create a balanced presentation of Lev's stylistic choices and also the content of his work. A detail worth including here is also that Lev did not adhere to a strict rhythm and allowed himself slant rhymes in his work, and thus I have done the same in an attempt to make up for some of the lost precision in the translation of the content.

STORIES

Pencil drawing by the translator



Revolution of the Ignorant

Dreadful curiosity gripped Wa'il the Bedouin as he listened to the radio in the Mahmudiyya village café. Some time ago, he had also admired how the *haki* could recreate speech, but he was particularly puzzled when he heard this small box recite the Qur'an, then sing, then speak just like a man during programs on health or self-guidance. He would listen especially when rhymed poetry would emerge from it. And by "from it," he was not exactly sure what he meant. There were no tubes coming from the box to send out sounds as there had been with the *haki*. Sometimes sounds from the box would swell thick and layered and then the next moment turn soft and thin. Sometimes he considered the sounds to be music, though they felt alien to him and puzzled his senses. He could find no harmony or order to them. Most of the time he did not know what they meant or, ultimately, consider them music at all. His ears repelled them. His senses rejected them. Still, the music he did enjoy touched his senses and his heartstrings. He would feel the beat as he listened to the music eagerly, longingly. He would sigh.

He did not know what the box was or how to explain the source of its sounds, songs, and speech. He remembered how much more sense the *haki* had made to his limited, simple mind. He knew it had turned on when the café worker had cranked the handle of the turntable and the needle had gone back to the beginning. He knew the *haki* could return to past songs on the record and play them exactly the same way. He knew also that Abu Abtan's fingers, toying with a small wooden button, would bring out new suras from the Qur'an each day, new versions of songs and psalms, new conversations, commentaries, rhyming poems, and breaking news from Basra, Baghdad and Mecca. All this was beyond his comprehension. It bewildered him. It troubled him.

At first, he had thought there were *jinn* inside the box, but he later abandoned the idea. Surely, demons could not read from the Qur'an, even if they could sing songs and speak

nonsense. How could they conjure up news events? One day, he heard the box say that the government had begun to pave al-Mahmudiyah-Baghdad Road. The news was entirely correct. How could this be possible? Again, how could they produce programs on hygiene and recite bits of songs and poetry?

His small mind refused to believe that inside the box, a man was reciting the Qur'an, singing songs and reading poetry, as he could see how small a man would have to be to fit inside. It could not even fit a medium-sized bird. How could the box contain such an unlikely being?

One day, he approached the box, and what he saw was a singular box on a plain wooden table. But what caught his attention was the presence of a black wire connected to the back of the trunk, leading outside. It connected at the roof of the cafe with another wire which stretched across two poles. What were these threads under the sky? Were they bringing him sounds? Could they be the source of all these speeches that came through the box?

One day, curiosity got the best of him and, in an attempt to understand where the sound was coming from, he decided to cut the box's stretched wire. The opportunity arose one afternoon when the café was very empty. Without anyone noticing, he did the deed and returned to his home. Then in the evening, when Wa'il returned to the café as usual, he grew anxious when he saw Abu Abtan so angry and threatening. Abu Abtan was trying to make the box read the Qur'an and sing, and only after some time realized the upper wire had been cut, when one customer turned his attention to it. His anger swelled within him and he accused his servant Majdul, but his customers managed to convince him that the wire must have been cut by some sort of tension or by windstorms.

The next day, someone had fixed the wire, reconnecting it. Wa'il was astonished to find the box broadcasting. The wire must be the basis for everything! What magic did it have inside

of it? And what strong force was it made it spout songs and conversations and to recite the Qur'an? What mystified Wa'il most was hearing friends of his at the café say that the Qur'an and these speeches were broadcasted from Baghdad or Egypt, after Wa'il had learned that Egypt was farther away than Mecca. All this arrived to their distant village with no tube or wire.

All Wa'il desired was to know how this miraculous phenomenon occurred. What caused it? He would stare into space, alone, for a long time. He would sail in his thoughts, which always led him to great agitation and bitterness mixed with heavy pain, pushing him to unceasing annoyance.

Dear friend, this Wa'il was only a *falah* from the *Fatlah* tribe whose members had settled in the Mahmudiyah village, working in sowing and plowing. He was a young man of about twenty-eight, with a striking appearance. He was majestic, tall, broad, and tanned. Thick, jet-black hair decorated his brown cheeks and pointed chin. He had a hole in each ear with a ring in it as Bedouins wear. As for his *jalabia*, he wore it only after completing work. It was a garment made of simple striped cloth with a dagger in a leather sheath drooping from its belt. Wa'il had two wives and eight children, the oldest of whom was six years old.

One day, Wa'il sat on a large rock outside his cottage, staring out into the nothingness, burdened by his state of embarrassment and lack of understanding. The mystery befuddled him, turning in his mind. He played with various ideas as though reaching in the dark. A sense of loss and confusion overtook him terribly, and he began to feel disturbed not only in his head but in his body and heart. Yet he felt restless, taken by a will to right his mind, heart, and troubled soul. Most likely this situation was the source of the sadness that spread in Wa'il's soul and perhaps it was the root of that which took him over and dominated his whole spirit.

He pondered the issue of the little box and asked himself about its secret. Was it magic? It could be, it could not be. Was it strong enough to create poetry specials, tell the news, and chant the Qur'an? Was magic what it preached to people when it gave religious, moral, and health-related advice? No! And if it were magic, how could it reach all the listeners, all his friends, without any of them noticing it was magic?

How could it be magic if the community swore the Qur'an they listened to was recited in Baghdad or in Egypt! So strange...

Was it a divine miracle? It could be, for when one pushed the box, the Qur'an would emerge from silent wood. Yet as it repeated every day and followed basic laws of logic, perhaps it was not a miracle. For example, if one part of the object were abandoned, like the wire, then there would be no more Qur'an or talk shows. Hadn't he himself tried to see if there were something speaking within the box? Hadn't there been nothing there, suggesting it could be a miracle? And if it were not a miracle then how could the sound broadcast in Baghdad and play for him at the same time? He would never believe it possible that the source of the Qur'an and the news was Baghdad or Egypt. That would be absurdity, utter nonsense.

There had to be something inside the box that he could not see, something beneath this heavy wooden veil. There had to be, inside of it, something speaking, possible something that resembled the *haki*. And, surely, it had to be alive, as it would change throughout time, making songs and new suras each day.

So what was this that at the same time was a singer, poet, newscaster, and a melody on the violin? He could hear a woman's voice sometimes, so was there a woman in the box? No, he would hear the Qur'an in the unmistakable voice of a man. Were both a man and a woman inside the box? Or was this a person who changed from man to woman?

Perhaps it could change its accent and tone, but where was it in the confines of this small box? Then he realized something that entirely flipped his thinking. If there were a person inside of it, as he predicted, then what was the purpose of this wire facing the sky and that, if not for it, the Qur'an could not be recited and no songs could emerge from the box?

So the wire was the source! Then what about the wire made it the root of all the songs and speeches he listened to?

No, no, this wire was nothing but a medium, but he did not know what kind. Could it communicate with the person inside the box? What could the wire do with the person reading the Qur'an and singing songs?

Hours passed in this way: muddled, confused, and restless. One of Wa'il's wives came to him tried to make him laugh and lift his melancholy. She tried to discover what was bothering him but Wa'il kept his reasons a secret. He kept away from her, and she suspected there was another woman. She returned to ask him what was making him so sad and confused, yet he gave her nothing but an order telling her to go away.

He began to linger in the café, approaching the strange box from time to time, watching with great concentration how Abu Abtan managed the device and made it sing and read the Qur'an. He learned and perfected the method. If he were allowed to handle it, he could do so quickly and with ease.

One night, just before daybreak, Wa'il awoke and could not fall back asleep. He was thinking about the secret of the box. The idea kept turning in his mind, disrupting his every thought. Suddenly, curiosity, agitation and sheer ignorance pushed him to arise, sitting up to examine his dagger. He made his way to the cafe.

When he approached the café he found it utterly calm, and entered through its open door. He did not notice Majdul the servant, covered in a blanket and sleeping, until he heard him snore loudly.

Wail knew where the box was located, for he had seen Abu Abtan put it in a small cupboard attached to the wall, then lock it with a key he put in his chest pocket. Wa'il unsheathed his dagger and planted it, with keen caution, in the wood of the cupboard. Then, in a moment, the wood broke apart. He took the box in his hand and tried to operate it as he had seen Abu Abtan do, forgetting about the servant lying covered close by.

As he turned the small dial, gentle music emanated from the box, and Wa'il began to smile at it and swell with joy. He turned the dial further and jostled it. What came out of it this time was among the most terrible sounds, getting louder and louder, rougher and rougher.

The banging and whirring grew so loud that Wa'il's body began to tremble as if he were a feather in the blowing wind. He kept turning the dial, and the terrible sounds subsided and strangely-pronounced speech emerged. Terrified, he knew there must be a kingdom of *jinn* inside and that the demons had all emerged from their hiding places. He had not heard a person's voice but rather the chattering of many people, sometimes screaming and sometimes giggling in unpleasant, frightening laughter. Thus, Wa'il suspected all the *jinn* had gathered and settled in this strange box. He had no choice. He decided to destroy it and the *jinn* inside.

He took the box in his hands, and fueled by the great panic and upheaval inside of him, threw it on the ground with all his might. Pieces of it flew around the cafe. Suddenly, the voices subsided.

The servant felt a pain in his head where some bits of metal had hit him. He breathed in sharply in panic, not knowing if he was dreaming or seeing things. He did not know what to do

when Wa'il stood before him except to engage his legs and run wildly to the wind, professing his belief in God and Muhammad. Some nearby *dhimmi* residents who had been sleeping awoke to his screams and ran into the road. Wa'il tried to escape and hide, but the people found him, caught him easily, and took him to the police for arrest.

Not five days had passed since that incident and armed police guards were accompanying Wa'il on the way to the central prison.



Pencil drawing by

The Vision

the translator

I was recently visited by a friend of mine. We had met some time ago, but shortly after, our paths had separated. He was based in

Hala and I in Baghdad. We saw one another only by coincidence, when he would visit Baghdad for a short vacation. Much time had passed since I had last seen him when he visited my home that day. I was busy studying when my servant came to inform me that a friend of mine by the name of something or other wanted to see me. So I rushed to the stairs and descended them lightly and swiftly, thinking only of meeting him and of our conversations to come. A wave of great anticipation came upon me. There was such an intimate bond of friendship between the two of us.

I found him waiting for me at the door and welcomed him, taking his hand. I grabbed his arm and pulled him straight into the foyer. I felt such excitement my lips could barely move to utter words of welcome. So I was taken aback when my friend responded to me so coldly, with a forced, crooked smile. I could not help but notice a certain darkness to his expression. He could barely speak.

I came to notice a black mourning badge fastened onto him and I dropped my enthusiastic welcome. I ceased my laughter and my smile, and lowered my eyes. I looked at him silently. He was standing still, inanimate.

I asked him the meaning of all this. Had some tragedy or death come to pass, perhaps to a family member? He stared, motionless, and muttered the words, "my sister."

"Which sister?" I blurted out. "What happened? And when?" Shifting his gaze, he replied, "My youngest sister, the one whose wedding you attended two years ago. Ten days ago she fell ill. She felt pains in her stomach. Two and a half days ago, she left the world."

A violent shock came over me, trailed by despair. "A tragedy, *ya 'azizi. Allah yirhamha*, may God have mercy upon her. I remember the night of her wedding she had given me a bouquet of flowers for my sister. She had such a gentle nature, so sweet, so humorous, so polite. *Ya Allah*,

oh death! Dear friend, how can I comfort you? For any comfort would be useless. I cannot help you forget her, for that too would be meaningless.”

I saw my friend’s eyes, now full of silent tears. I closed my mouth and patted his shoulder. Mechanically, I sat. Tears were endlessly streaming down his cheeks.

“This is the way of every living creature on the face of the earth,” I said, still quiet. “Not one of us can escape death. We are of God and to God we shall return. What happened to your sister is one of the worst things that can happen, still in the richness of youth, still so ripe. How many thousands like her meet the same fate? No one can escape it.”

I managed to make my friend smile. Emerging from his despair and weakness, he let out a deep, wounded sigh.

“Yes, what you say is true. That is the world and this is our share in it and I thank God for all that happens, for everything, but...” He shook his head and held it in his hands. I could see nothing of his face but heard his moans and saw his tears, which he did not conceal from me. Something arose within me and tears began to stream down my cheek, but I quickly dried them. I bent down and lifted his head, trying to control how shaken I was myself.

“This is not fitting for a man like you, *ya ‘aziz*. Even if you feel an urge to cry. This is but one of the misfortunes created for you. You must carry it in this life, in this world. This place will close you in, and your presence here alone with me will tempt you to cry. It will bring sadness to your heart and remind you of all this. Come, let’s go outside.”

My friend was the kind of person with bones too weak to hold in grief. If pain becomes too hard and builds within them, they cannot endure it. Unprepared, they become weak and reveal secrets, wanting someone to open up to and to carry their burden. Some philosophers and psychologists might say this flaw denies these people of more noble psychological phenomena.

Yet this friend of mine was not like these people. I knew that his crying in front of me would relieve him. It would let him feel the lightness of admitting you are wounded and getting some rest. Still, I did feel ashamed to be around a man over the age of twenty-eight crying.

Eventually he regained his composure, yet a grim air remained in him. He looked around the room as though tracing in the air, straight and curved, of different sizes, without uttering a sound.

Then he said, "Do you believe in dreams?" I was amazed at what I was hearing. It seemed to me that sadness was making him lose his mind. What did belief in dreams have to do with his position in the wake of his sister's death? I prepared myself to speak while hiding a sarcastic smile. It occurred to me that perhaps he was saying this to try to distract himself. It was my duty to take on the idea, to delve deep into it so as to relieve him of his pain for another hour.

So I said, "I believed in them when I was a child. Sometimes they scared me and other times they delighted me. I denied them in my adolescence, thinking I should not spend one thought on dreams, being as they were in opposition to truth and inconsistent with reality. Then I returned to my old ways, and in my young adulthood, I believed them; I read about them in philosophy books and modern psychology. They are worthy of consideration, reflection. They are the truest picture of the abstract self, of affectations and mannerisms. They are a lens to the true image of the spirit of man. From your questions and tendencies in your subconscious, answers and possibilities can express themselves. I believe in that. I'm certain."

My friend listened to me with great attention. Then, standing still in deep thought, he said, "I'm aware of all that, but I'm asking you about dreams with regards to prophecy. In other words, you see a scenario in a dream and it happens in wakefulness just as you saw it in the dream. Do you believe that?"

I responded, “No. All I know about dreams and what can be proven to be true is that they are a picture of the fantasies and inclinations of the subconscious mind. What you witness in dreams and the picture you see of yourself or others within them is simply how you ultimately see and feel about this person or self. As for their ability to predict, that is something I cannot prove. Of if a regular person’s subconscious can speculate this way. Only a prophet could truly do so!”

“I sense in your last words a tone of sarcasm. Despite yourself, you will see from what I will tell you; divination in dreams is not an impossible thing. Listen to my story.

Fifteen days ago, five days before my sister’s death, I was working in Hala. That night, asleep, I had this vision. There I was in my younger sister’s home in Baghdad. The people around me were all wailing, lamenting, and I saw my mother sitting in one of the corners slapping her own cheeks with strength and cruelty. She moaned over my sister who had already died, as I explained. She told me my sister had wished to see me when she was on her deathbed. She had screamed in her loudest, most throttling voice, “I want ‘Aziz! My brother ‘Aziz, I want to see him!”

A woman, one of my relatives, explained all this to me. She stressed to me that my sister had called to me from the bottom of her heart. The last sentence she had said was “I want ‘Aziz... ‘Aziz.”

My heart felt utterly torn in pain, in grief, and I screamed out, “Where is she now? I just arrived!” She responded amid sobs, “They buried her. They closed the coffin.”

And I screamed, I wailed, shaking the corners of the house, “I want to see her! I *must* see her!”

I was in a crazed fury, frantic, searching for her. A group of men and women stopped me, trying to calm my outburst. They told me it would be impossible to find her. She had already died. There was no point in seeing her.

I conceded, and sorrow overwhelmed me. I began to cry and I awoke.

The night neared dawn. Yet after what I had seen, I could not again close my eyes. I groaned about traveling to Baghdad the next morning. I went into the other room where my servant was lying and I awoke him. He had heard me screaming words he had not understood, he had heard me wail, but he had reserved judgement.

That morning arrived sad and dim, and yet a kind of confidence and hope had returned to my heart. So I got up, washed, got dressed and started to make breakfast. Calm settled inside of me, more and more each hour. Sun rays rid me of most of my uncertainty and worry.

As usual, a coworker of mine picked me up to go to our office and I told him about my vision. I told him I was planning to seek permission to miss work soon and to travel to Baghdad. There was something I needed to be certain about. My friend mocked me. What I had seen had been a dream, he said, and nothing more.

After some rumination, I concluded that of course he was correct, even if my instinct suggested otherwise. On top of that, asking for a vacation on days like these in which one has work that cannot be put off would be difficult, especially if the reason for the request had come from a dream.

I told my friend I still wanted to send a telegram to my parents in Baghdad inquiring whether they knew about my sister's health. He started to laugh at me. He emphasized that sending the telegram would cause them confusion, especially since I had not made a habit of

sending telegrams and I had been at my job for more than three years. I had, however, sent my usual letter asking about the health of all the members of the family.

I received a reply the next morning saying that everyone was well. I forgot the dream but I kept thinking of my sister and feeling a great longing to see her and hug her for no reason. The dream had occurred on Monday night. I decided to travel to Baghdad that Thursday, spend Friday and the weekend there.

After an excruciating wait, Thursday came. Yet, to my surprise, a colleague of mine invited me to an evening hosted by another of our colleagues for his son's birthday that day. And, he had insisted that I not get away with refusing the invitation.

I tried to avoid it but ultimately bent to the great pressure. I postponed my travel to the next morning. Thus I went to the party with my colleague, feeling as though coals were burning in my stomach. Upon arrival, I found my colleagues making noise and celebrating. My heart still felt pained but they forced me to drink wine nonetheless. I was silent. I saw my colleagues clapping their hands together and eating the buffet, and I felt an urge to tip their cups and jeer at them. I gulped down wine and felt it tearing at my insides. I felt I could cry.

Then, among my friends and amid the party, I saw an image of my sister lying in her coffin. All the clapping reminded me suddenly of my relatives and their weeping as I had seen in the dream. I felt like fainting. At once, I felt the heavy burden of the tradition we were accustomed to in these countries, that being never to reject a friend's invitation at all costs, and how an apology could never, never make up for it. I cursed that convention. Suddenly it seemed to be the ugliest phenomenon in our society already so full of shortcomings. I did not leave my colleague's house until one o'clock in the morning. I felt the urgent need for freedom and sleep.

I did not awake until eight o'clock on Friday morning. Hurriedly, I dressed and left the house to rent a car. Luckily, I found one ready to drive. We proceeded, and after half an hour, the driver stopped the car and left it to check the rubber of the back tire. He found a hole there in desperate need of repair. I got out of the car too, feeling silently at the brink of explosion. I was sure that what I had seen must have happened, and that this delay was happening just to postpone confirmation of everything I had seen in the vision. I was sure I would never see my sister again.

Somehow, the repairs delayed us an entire hour. Yet, finally, we resumed driving and Baghdad emerged before us at eleven thirty in the morning.

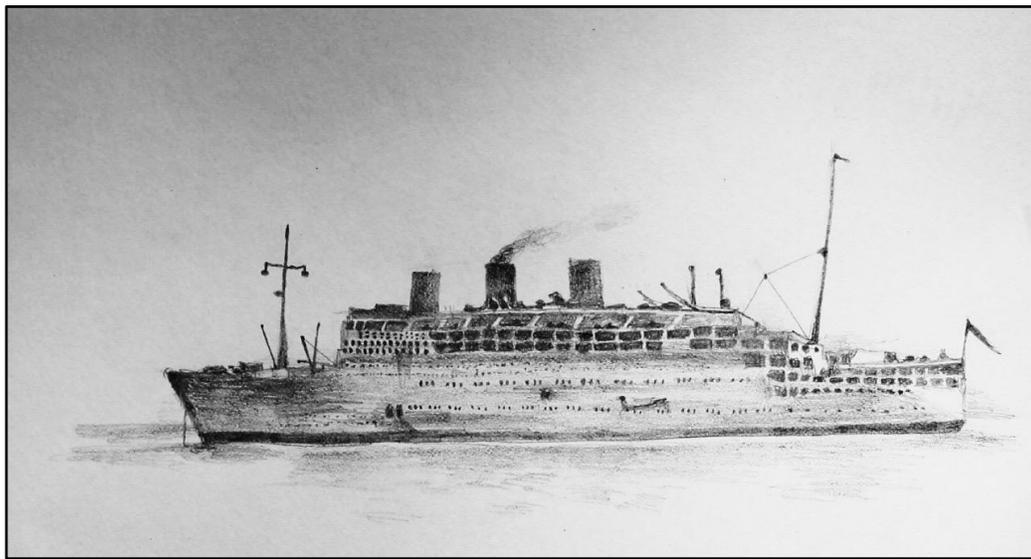
My steps directed me to enter my little sister's house and I felt my heart leap from my chest and run in front of me.

A disturbing wail came from among my relatives, and I joined in and began to cry. Inside of me, my heart sparked a painful contraction that nearly destroyed me. When I entered, I was surprised to see the woman I had seen in my dream who told me exactly what she had said in the dream. I went over the words she had told me in my dream and I did exactly what I had tried to do in my dream. I tried to see my dead sister. A group of people stood between us."

My friend said, "Thus I covered her with dirt without even having seen her. That is how my vision came true, and every detail I had seen within it."

Pencil drawing by the translator

The Return



At twenty past midnight, Jozef Adam remained anxiously awaiting his wife in the mansion in Greece. He was leaning on a chair with his forearms, watching the the embers in the fireplace, his eyes protruding and mouth agape as if a motion picture were playing right before him. He puffed smoke from his tenth cigarette with uncommon intensity. Jittery in his seat, he moved between sitting and standing, moving and ceasing to move. When he tired of sitting, he traversed the room, back and forth, unsure of what to do.

The night had turned out agonizing and deeply sad. Sorrow fell not only upon him but on all that surrounded him. Anything he laid eyes upon returned his stare with a look of grief. The

room was a dull, lonely wasteland. The world outside was relentlessly dark and rain fell on the street in a downpour.

Most of the thoughts in his head seemed not to be about anything really in particular. They were more like nebulous, anxious musings circling his brain. After a great deal of effort, he concluded that they mostly derived from his family life: specifically, the way his wife treated him with utter shamelessness and apathy.

Eventually, he felt a kind of contraction within him and a sudden gloom. He decided to occupy himself with ideas of commerce. He began to count how many acres he had under his name and how much he possessed in cash and money transfers and how many servants and *fallahin* he had under his power. He punched in an estimate of his property including his buildings and land and agricultural crops and debts. Yet he could not reach a number that seemed correct or convincing. A picture of his wife with that reckless expression on her face disrupted his every calculation. There was no escape from this gloom. Her voice, in a clear, cutting tone, accused him of bad deeds: how he denied her things, how he robbed her of her freedom and trespassed in her private affairs. All this reached his ears and rang loud, painful rings inside of him and would not let him rest.

Puffs of smoke left his lips only with a weary sigh, sometimes followed by a tortured moan or by his banging his fist on the chair. Perhaps he could release something that way.

Jozef's great hope had been to have a child born to him, yet he was denied this joy. His wife strongly rejected the thought of having children. She loathed the idea of months of pregnancy that would jeopardize her physique and the slimness of her waist, and the months of breastfeeding that would deprive her of nights staying up at parties into the wee hours of the morning.

Now his hope was to win over a wholesome, kind-hearted woman to help release him from the boredom of work and his wearisome days. He hoped he would find eternal bliss within her embrace. Yet his wife would leave him in the evening and return at midnight or at dawn, spending nights at sleepless, lewd dance parties or in the arms of her lovers who were among his closest friends. Sometimes she would spend the entire night with one of them. And still, despite himself, Jozef remained subdued and silent, uttering not a word of reproach. He had no right to ask her where she had spent the night. And if he would try to say anything, then woe, woe...

When her tongue began to babble, her mouth would widen like a roaring lioness, furious at her husband, lamenting his low morals and demeaning rules, and saying how she tired of this life in which her husband would intervene in his wife's private affairs, managing her as though he came from a line of those Arabs who use a woman like an ox and profit from her.

Latent jealousy awoke within his heart, almost escaping it, and redness took over his face. Then, it returned to its paleness and yellowed. He had begun to feel much more envy now than before. Indeed, it blazed painfully within him, rendering him an unthinking, brainless beast.

Oh, that cursed woman, how he tired of her. He tired of her breaching the sanctity of his honor, *harmatu assharaf*, and his meeting her trespass with silence and stillness. She would taunt him and degrade him, and he accepted complacency! Was he really such a fool? Was his soul really so stifled? Was this really him, accepting disrespect, kneeling before this woman who had desecrated his honor? Was he to stab her in the heart, wash the stains of shame, branded on his forehead, with her blood?

He returned to his senses. What was this emotional upheaval coming over him, so strongly and violently? He could neither overcome nor even face it with any amount of composure. What was this, hitting him in the face with jealousy? What was this defiance that

now had him by the reins, nearly driving him to commit a crime? What was this gloom coming over him? What was this sudden urge to rebel from his submissiveness that suddenly seemed to possess his spirit?

Oh, was he forgetting? How could he forget? He was of Arab lineage and birth! At once, something moved him to think about Baghdad, where his ancestors and parents lived, in which he had been born, and within whose borders he had spent the majority of his childhood and adolescence. He pictured various scenes and certain walks in the city that ignited the same feeling of gloom.

He remembered he had uncles, aunts, and a wife there, and beautiful children. He began to feel a deep sense of longing.

Yusuf Adham was born in Baghdad in the late season of 1890 to kind and honorable parents of balanced character. He was their precious child, their only child, and they devoted their whole selves to his care. He grew up nourished with love, kindness, and indeed, pampering. From the age of twelve, his dream had been to study at an institution in Istanbul, but his parents strongly opposed the thought. They clung onto him, keeping him in their arms so they would never lose him. They were simply afraid for him, afraid of rising winds and drops of rain. They kept him under close supervision and tightened his leash. He was not to leave the house alone except to go to school, in which he studied the Qur'an and things from other writings.

Yusuf had an uncle in Istanbul, which made him even more inclined to travel there. One day, a situation arose, which caused the uncle to travel to Baghdad for work related to his trade. The uncle would remain there for a short amount of time.

Yusuf was by then nearly eighteen years of age. When his uncle was returning to Baghdad, he tried to find him to take advantage of the opportunity. He approached his father about it and asked him if he would be permitted to accompany his uncle to Istanbul. His father wholly rebuked him, boiling with disappointment. Yusuf became consumed with the desire to harm himself. He refused to eat for an entire day. His parents tried in vain to convince him to stay. They resorted to begging him for forgiveness. His mother cried in front of him and his father cried. His uncle refused to take him to Istanbul, away from his father. He said there were troubles and rebellions there one could not imagine, and that he could not see how it would be wise to hold responsibility for his nephew. He felt strongly about this. Still, Yusuf became insistent and stubborn. He threatened suicide.

Consequently, his father could do nothing but send him off. Frankly, he prepared the equipment Yusuf needed for travel. Yusuf left Baghdad in mid-1910 setting out for Istanbul. There, he entered one of its schools and grew immersed in its knowledge, staying with his kind uncle who cherished and loved him, having no children of his own.

Yusuf could not remain at the school for more than one academic year before he would help his uncle in his business affairs, so Yusuf commenced a variety of tasks in the business. His brilliance dazzled his uncle and drew the two closer together. His uncle would miss his presence even if he were gone for an hour.

Yusuf was enchanted by Istanbul and never thought of Baghdad, his homeland and place of his parents. He barely wrote to them, while letters from his father would arrive each week, urging him not to delay his correspondence and begging him to return.

Three years passed this way. Yusuf remained in Istanbul, working with his uncle, always loyal to him. His uncle assigned to him a monthly salary and percentage of his profit, and in three years, Yusuf had accumulated quite a significant sum.

One day, his uncle received a telegram with the news that Yusuf's mother had fallen ill and that death was approaching. She requested her son as quickly as possible. Yusuf's uncle informed him of the telegram and its importance, teaching a lesson on a son's obligation to his parents. He urged him to return quickly to Baghdad, assuring him he would be sent for after his mother's recovery or death.

Yusuf obeyed his uncle's command. As Yusuf had grown, he was now more easily convinced by logic. He could find no escaping his inevitable return to Baghdad and prepared all he required to travel.

The uncle received another telegram. This time, it contained Yusuf's mother's obituary. His father asked his son to hurry. Unfortunately for Yusuf, his uncle pocketed the paper and said nothing, afraid to dishearten him or discourage him from returning. The uncle shook his hand and said goodbye, thanking him for his fidelity with the money these three years. Yusuf, in turn, thanked him for all his kindness and said his goodbye.

When Yusuf arrived in Baghdad, his father received him in black clothes of mourning. Yusuf understood everything, and his eyes wept painful tears.

Adham's heart felt wide open. His only son had returned to him after such a long absence in good health, tall and broad. There were more men around now.

He smothered Yusuf in a deep embrace. His son's tears, falling in sadness for the sake of his mother, quenched the thirst of his longing.

A month after Yusuf's return, his father said, "It was your mother's last wish that I marry you off, *ya Yusuf*, as soon as you arrived in Baghdad. I insist that you marry Samira, your mother's sister's daughter. She is a kind, beautiful girl. I am giving you the will as it is written, adding my own support for you in this marriage. My son, you have become much too old to be celibate. Listen to your mother's request, which she had so wanted for so long. She just wanted you to be happy. Do not disobey your father who has no one in his life but you."

Despite himself, Yusuf married, and though he found his happiness overcast, he grew closer to his wife Samira. She loved him, and came into his heart through tenderness and care.

At the start of the following year she bore him a child by the name of Samir. He was the joy of Yusuf's life and the embodiment of Samira's hope. Yusuf's child and his beloved wife made him forget all about his uncle and Istanbul. He began to use up the wealth he had amassed during his long absence.

Yet one day, he heard news from Istanbul that trade was flowing and lucrative. Potential gains were extravagant. The news swayed Yusuf, and his penchant for adventure sprang awake within him and reminded him anew of Istanbul, beautiful and advanced as it was. He set off on a journey of great cost and consequence. He informed his father that he was traveling alone to Istanbul, and if he found the land good and fertile and trade profitable and life favorable, he would write to him and his associates would send for his wife and child.

The news hurt Samira, and her heart overflowed with sorrow, pained that her beloved husband had left her to provide for his father, and that his love for her and for his child was not strong enough for him to take them along in his travels. Still, she held onto Yusuf's words, assuring her that his absence would not last forever. He would bring her and his father to Istanbul and there they would live.

Yusuf left Baghdad for the second and last time and arrived in Istanbul. There, he found his uncle waiting for him, and there his uncle offered to work with him. Yusuf found the opportunity satisfying. Then, his uncle offered to send him to the capital of Greece, where he would be his secretary and an agent. Yusuf found this opportunity fully satisfying. He remained in Istanbul just a short while before leaving for Athens, the capital of Greece.

A year passed. Trade surpassed any measure of success Yusuf could have imagined. Fortune smiled upon him. His wealth was certainly not small and Yusuf forgot about Samira and Samir in the arms of a Greek lover he had taken as a mistress.

When his uncle heard the news, he admonished him. And when he found his admonishment had not worked, that his colleague had fallen into an abyss of immorality, he feared it would drag him into ruin as well. He cut off his business relations with him and discarded every last bit of them.

Yusuf's eyes finally opened to the effects of his actions, so he invested himself in work and seriousness. He established some independent shops and thus began his trajectory towards superior fame in the world of trade. When the Great War came over Greece, Yusuf emerged from it a winner, doubling his fortune.

After seven years in Greece, Yusuf married a beautiful Greek woman. He changed his name, "Yusuf" to "Jozef" and "Adham" to "Adam," and came to be known by tradespeople and in his Greek passport as Jozef Adam.

Despite all that had transpired, he continued to send his father a sum every month for his wife and child. Yusuf had received a letter from her begging him to return and assuring him that

she had remained faithful to him and that she was waiting and preparing for his arrival. She told him how she guarded over his son and surrounded him with her care and affection.

Yusuf tried to forget the letter and failed to respond so his wife cut off all correspondence with him. Still, he insisted that his secretary allocate a certain amount of money to be sent to them at the beginning of each month.

Yusuf became buried in his life in Greece and started to live like one of its people. He began to have friends and relatives there, people he loved.

His home life was happy at first, but these feelings quickly faded. He started to develop a permanent dislike for his wife. Not a day would pass without some kind of argument, in the morning or in the middle of the night. This wife of Jozef's was named Lydia. She was a woman without morals, never thinking of her husband or his honor. She spent most of her days and nights with her various lovers. Frankly, she loathed her husband. She knew he was not of her kind but rather of the Arab race, of which she knew little. Still, she had heard they were savage and jealous, and that their wives wore black masks with just one eye showing so they could know where to go. The husbands would subject their wives to arbitrary, exhausting tasks, as one would do to servants in her country.

Lydia was bound to her husband only in one piece of writing: the gold document. Indeed, she had married him for his wealth. Whenever her mind would drift to leaving him, she, her friends, and her lovers became afraid, for she would lose nothing by staying in contact with him as long as they lived an affluent, opulent life, and as long as she could still enjoy sexual relations with her lovers and friends.

In this way, Jozef gloomily lived his life. All the while, his wealth was increasing and his agents managed his sizable profits, yet he could not see how they could equal even one carat of happiness that any hard worker might have.

He suffered and grew fractured in the face of his wife's irreverence towards his honor. He was enraged at her contempt for him, but he stifled the pain of his longing, never thinking to show it.

We return to Jozef as we had left him, in the stately palace in the country of Greece, already age forty-five, having been married to his wife Lydia for fifteen years. We left him thinking about his her, her immorality, and her disregard for his honor. Jealousy had flared up within his stomach in a corrosive flame. Remembering his wife in Baghdad and his son, wondering if Samira's kindness and love for him had been a mirage, his heart longed to kiss Samir's fragrant cheek. Oh, if only he could return and leave this cursed wife! He could no longer stand her mocking him and playing with his heart. If only he could leave this country so foreign to him. Though it was full of wealth and riches, it had denied him other pleasure. This country was the home of his wife's hatred, here he had been denied children, here his home life was somber and he always felt a feeling of foreignness. Here the citizens' morals and ways were different from his people's customs and traditions.

Again, he remembered his pure, beautiful country. He thought of what he had read about it and what he had heard about it, that it had made great strides in its civilization, rising up from the oppressive colonial yoke and breaking free. It had become an independent kingdom whose rulers and leaders were pure Arab, and its capital had become an important place in the political and economic spheres. He longed for it. He felt an urge to return.

He felt suddenly compelled to take the risk. His soul awoke and urged him forward. Then he looked outside, finding an overcast sky and heavy black clouds. The rain would not stop pouring on this dismal country, his heart darkened. His longing for his country doubled, and he felt that night that his home was far away. All that was inside of him and all that surrounded him said, in one voice: *return*.

He remembered that he was wealthy. He could sell his property, liquidate his goods, and recover his debts. He would return to his country with this great wealth and live there in security, comfort, and luxury. Beyond that, he would serve his country and help its citizens by means of his great fortune. So what was making him hesitate? He so hoped to find his wife and son, to reconstruct his family, to shake the dust of misery off of it and live a happy life. He compared this Greek wife who toyed with him and to whom he gave whatever she desired, to that faithful wife whom had sent for him after his absence of seven years, always faithful to his promise, waiting for him, raising his son. It was just her luck that he was so negligent, so insolent, sending her a small amount of money each month. That might have been her only way to care for herself, her child, and his father.

He could not get these thoughts out of his head. In an instant, he pulled off his clothes and turned to look at his bedroom with new clarity. And the contractions he felt within him, his heavy nightmare, faded, and he grew cheerful again. He thought about his plan with excitement and faith. It was the perfect plan and the most honorable. He surrendered to an easy sleep, worrying no more about his wife, absolutely certain she would not come back that night, amid the lightning and rain.

The next Monday, Jozef began showing his property to brokers, telling them of his will to sell it quietly and without informing his wife or her close friends. He had begun to liquidate his property and quietly recover all his debts. He had already told his wife to do whatever she pleased and that he would no longer scold her. He made an effort to avoid her, in all roads and all ways.

After three months had passed, all our friend Jozef's wealth had turned to gold or cash deposited at various banks in the vault. Only his mansion remained, and a deal was in place to give up all that still remained in a few months.

Thus, Jozef Adam sold the last of his property without his wife ever finding out. One night, Jozef packed his bags and supplies for travel. He gave his servants everything he owed them in cash and purchased a ticket from a Greek steamer company, setting out for Alexandria.

Jozef did all this without Lydia knowing a thing. That night, Lydia was away as usual with one of her lovers at a dance party. Jozef seized the opportunity and left the palace at dawn to catch a steamer that would carry him into the sunrise.

Lydia returned from her late-night party the next morning. She neither thought about her husband nor asked about him. She did not care to see him tell her he was leaving the mansion for his duties, and she lay on her mattress to rest her body, tired from staying up into the night.

After such a long night, her sleep was pleasant. She lay in a deep, pleasant slumber. Not a single dream disturbed her. At three o'clock in the afternoon she awoke cheerfully and went to bathe. Then, she began to pace in circles. Only then had she begun to wonder about her husband who was to accompany her that night to a play at the great national theater.

Masterfully, Lydia beautified herself and dressed in her most glamorous and expensive clothing. Her goal was to look beautiful that night so tomorrow morning, she could more boldly state her many demands.

She entered the salon, wondering if he would be there, and asked the servant about him. He replied that Jozef had gone out early and had not returned. When she entered his office, she found herself alone, but for a large envelope on his desk, which caught her eye. On it was written:

To the Lydia, a Respected Woman,

She seized it, opened it, stared at it and began to read:

Saidati, I tire of this life, this dismal life, which I have spent in your company. Fifteen years I have passed like this. I tire of this lewd and careless life you live unabashedly under my roof, while you are my wife. Do not think I am unaware. You wanted my fortune, not me. If not for my value, you would have left me long ago. The many modes of mockery to which you have subjected me have inspired me to defect to this move, which I will use once and never again.

I have sold all my property, ya azizati, and liquidated all the goods in my possession, and all that remained in my pockets. Just some remains, a small amount, but of great significance. As for this mansion, in which you slept for ten years when you were my lover, it is to be sold too. You will enjoy it for but two final months, at the end of which the buyers will, without second thought, evict you. Only the furniture will remain, a sizable fortune which, I swear, you do not even deserve.

By the time you read this message, ya azizati, I will be leaving Athens for my dearest home in Iraq, where my people and my love live: my faithful wife, and my beloved son. I leave you to your lovers who enjoy you. Congratulations, ya azizati, on your freedom, which you have finally

*gained after a long struggle. In my absence, you are no longer constrained. I will not bother you.
You are free.*

*With this letter you may find a folded divorce document complete with my genuine
signature and another folded document bestowing upon you the rights to handle the furniture.*

As always, be at ease. Be loved.

The loyal Jozef Adam.

POEMS

With a Tree

The trunk reached out its hand and bowed
its servant's back and begged for my blessing.
Its eyes met mine, made me weak with their staring
full of suffering, straight towards me now.

Dread washed over me as the drunk drew near,
its hands grabbing air, closer and closer.
I collapsed, so gripped by terror
I lose all my senses, then even fear.

Once in its spindly arms I heard
the sound of wounded whispering.
My son is coming near to me it said, voice dry and croaking.

*This is your mother; hear the wail of my blood.
All my life I have had this cup to guard
Now my heart swells to be just an hour in your arms.*

An Idea

All life was frozen, trickling in the brain's round dome
from the ghoul to the most despicable insect class
all calm as the dead. In silence night passed,
troubled my memories, frightened me so.

But wind picked up suddenly in the shape of a serpent
and its twisted tail and fangs were bright.
hissing filled the air, and it raced towards me,
spitting poison containing the flames of death.

I broke into a run toward any shelter,
pushed my body between walls
seeking refuge in the rock.

My terror pleased this devil of mine.
It toyed with me, flying high then drawing in.
Drunk was its dancing and free of crying.

The Sleeping Baby

The baby is sleeping. Don't wake him, hush here,
my baby sleeps peacefully. You can't see him
but his breathing betrays life pulsing
in his chest— it's been beating for twenty years.

His breathing is quick. Do you know why?
Dreams spark and terrify his mind.
Never having a taste of fresh life,
in his he wrestles ugliness and fright.

Once, suffering made his face red as blood, cheeks
painted with rich, wholesome tones,
and the sweet quiet baby remained no more.

I'm afraid to wake him from his sleep,
should he seek revenge. I once heard him, say, waking:
Father, you have failed. I've learned to live with next to nothing.

In My World

In my wondrous world, do you know what dazzles me?
Not its stars or its fiery suns
nor its wide orbit or space, stretching on.
Its beauty is not linked to burning things.

I am not drawn to intelligence in its many forms,
to airplanes and vehicles, electricity and things
that make light into sound in labs in the city.
No, it's lights that amaze me the most.

If lights were to speak, in tones nearly mute,
then furniture at night would moan in pain,
for silent pictures on the walls who at daylight spoke their names.

I am moved by moments, invisible, passing through,
that reveal what they feel of the secrets of existence
and lift the curtain on the hidden parts of death.

The Sponge

He planted himself on a rock and he gripped
as if the rock leaked the elixir of life as a gift.
With no rock he did not know how to live.
Father, grandfather and uncle had dwelt upon it.

He saw the whales and fishes so free and wandering,
leaping into air, diving into the deep,
giddy and content to waste the sea.
They lived for themselves in laughter, so distracted, so empty.

He held his forehead in shame and a tremor blew through him
through his cold blood as the rocks shuddered
and he called out spells and cursed the waters

for they had let these lovers of sin,
in secret and in broad daylight mock
the life of rocks: pleasant floating and crashing.

Glossary

Allah: God

Allah yirhamha: "May God have mercy upon her," said of a person who has died.

‘Azizi: literally translated as "my prince," a respectful term of endearment.

‘Azizati: Same as above, feminine.

Dhimmi: second-class citizens in Islam on the basis of religion

Falah: Farmer, peasant

Jalabia: Long, simple, traditional garb

Haki: Gramophone, also "one who speaks"

Jinn: in Arabic folklore, a genie (indeed the root of this word) or a demon

Saidati: "dear," another formal term of endearment

Ustaz: Dialect version of "ustadh," professor or a formal way of addressing an older man

Ya: A particle added before stating a person's name or title to address or call them.

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