

MOHAMMED

Excerpts from “The City of No Peace”

I

Baghdad, peace abides no more
In your roads: there,
The sun seems ashamed to ship
Its hope, its great wishes, its signal for a new day
Over you, over our graves
Which we call homes.
I fear I have lost my humanity to my anger.
Rage moves me like a doll.
Women scratch their faces with bare hands
Leaving skin under their nails,
Crying their sons’ names,
With loud, bitter voices
Breaking even the stones.
Weddings, in my city of peace,
The city of no peace,
Are held at graveyards among tombstones
Surrounded by flowers of dust,
Winds playing hushed music.
Our happiness has been kidnapped.
No ransom is accepted.
We cry at their feet,
Asking for mercy,
But what should we expect from beasts?
We are sentenced to death
For being people
Who committed no crime but to live
In the city of peace,
The city of no peace.

II

Whom shall we blame?
Shall we point at
Ignorance, Hatred,
What we possess deep inside?

Is it our fault?
Is it some curse upon us
That we must take?
I feel doubt moving in my mind
It must be
That bastard's fault,
That son of a whore,
Who led us
From war to war,
Who let our brains
Think of nothing
But how to make a couple dinars
To feed those we lived under roofs,
Small, rented, expensive roofs,
Who let us forget
About reading a page,
About thinking about reading a page.
That son of a whore
Planted hate in our minds,
Forced us to believe
We Arabs are better than Kurds,
We Kurds are murdered by all Arabs,
We Shias are oppressed,
And Sunnis are our oppressors.
The tree has been growing for long.
Shall we blame the U.S.?
They did invade us,
Or, as some say, liberate us,
They did watch us
As we died,
As we waved guns in each others' faces.
Is that not what every invader wants?
A divided country is easy to rule,
Easy to steal from,
Easy to destroy.
They could have
Built this country, ended poverty,
Cut down the tree of hate,
Burned its roots,
Planted love and acceptance,
Forgiveness and understanding

In our minds.
They did not
Maybe they did not
Have this power in the first place.
So what to make and not to make?
Whose fault is this?
I must say: this generation's.
We care too much about the tree.
We don't want to see
What will happen
If we cut it down.

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Mohammed considers poetry a gamble, a roll of the dice. He shrugs at failure: the poetry he writes is what it is. He experiments with subject matter, with publication. He posts to Instagram, inspired by Neil Shea and Ruddy Roye, two active Instagram storytellers whom he met as visitors to the university's arts festival on social justice. He uses his Instagram posts to foster cross-cultural conversation. Beauty should help us look at the most difficult things, he believes. He says, "Poetry should not just describe a pretty garden." Then, he laughs. "My professors might be the first to disagree with me."

He pushes into the argument: "We live in a ridiculous world. Everyone's fighting. Everyone hates everyone. If not loving each other, we should at least work toward understanding each other." He recognizes the danger of writing stories he has never lived: "But I'm trying," he says. The attempt at empathy is worth the danger of falling short: "Poetry is a way to talk about shared humanity."

Attending a largely Kurdish university in which he as an Arab is a minority has changed him; it has informed what he wants from poetry. "I want to show them, the Kurds, that we are similar. I understand why they hate. What they have been through—the killing, mass graves, burning alive, forced relocation—it's not easy to forgive. What I feel sorry about is that they don't understand: the majority of Iraqis went through the same thing." Kurds received semi-autonomy in 1991, a status that allowed them to establish safety in their region and to prosper in that safety. The south of Iraq, Mohammed observes, still has yet to



draw close to where Kurds are now. The south of Iraq is still mired in violence.

Mohammed's own father spent ten years in Saddam's prisons, accused of being a member of the Dawa Party due to his attendance at mosque and his religious friends. The woman who would become his wife waited those ten years to marry him. Mohammed reflects, "He was my age when he was imprisoned." A short time after Mohammed's father was freed, the family fled to Yemen, Mohammed then only a year old. In the ten years the family lived in Yemen, Mohammed's paternal grandparents both died.

In 2003, with Saddam Hussein gone, the family could return home to Baghdad. After ten years in prison and ten years in exile, Mohammed's father repeats the most important lesson he has learned, "Patience. Patience."

Returning to Baghdad, just seeing garbage on the city's outskirts, Mohammed felt at home. He loves the city, as his father does. He has stayed with his city through the American occupation, the militias, the curfews, the emptied streets, the bombings. He has stayed as civilians started hunting civilians. He learned, if you are Shia, you don't go to these neighborhoods. If you are Sunni, not these. He has stayed through close explosions, gunfire, and mortar. "These were normal sounds for us. Our school was near an American base." He remembers particularly the death of a neighbor, Ali, twenty-one years old. He recalls the sound of the mother's grief, the way she cried her son's name over and over again. *Ali. Ali. Ali.* People had to hold her upright. "You can't explain why you love someone," Mohammed says. "I won't try to explain why I love this city."

Photograph by Erin Trieb