

Rising Poets of Iraq

Introduction

These young poets, students I taught in a poetry workshop offered by the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (AIUS), reveal a cross section of today's Iraq. They are Kurds, Arabs, Yezidis, Sunnis, Shias, atheists. But the labels name only fragments of their identities, for they all grew up in an era of upheaval and learned how to rebuild, again and again, their own ideas of home, nation, and self.

Their generation was born as the Iran-Iraq War came to a close, as Saddam Hussein's genocidal Anfal campaign began, as the Gulf War began and ended, and as the Kurdish Civil War broke out. Most of these poets have been forced to move—within their own country, to the greater Middle East, or to places culturally and physically remote, such as Holland and Sweden. They were teenagers during the 2013 American invasion. Those who were or came home navigated the South's sectarian violence or the North's unprecedented prosperity. The Islamic State invaded Iraq as they prepared to graduate from university.

Their lives and poetry tell of their generation, their Iraq. Just by writing what they have lived, are living, they describe concretely the great tensions and questions of war, religion, statehood—and within these far-reaching events, personal lives go on. Parents divorce, hearts break, a cousin dies from cancer, and all of it is posted on Facebook. These poets look sidelong at it all. One poet writes not propaganda, but a complex account of how young people fall in and out of step with a country's national project. Another poet writes heartbreak as an auction of innards, complete with auctioneer.

For these children of contested and shifting ground, poetry is space—to contemplate, to speak honestly, to find empathy, to laugh. Poetry is a territory of the mind that is, as one young poet said, “unchanging, yet changing.” To travel the imagined geography of the following poems is to feel timelessness and uncertainty held in the same breath.