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Writing Sample

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Checkpoints

From the widow of the bus you see how words congeal
and how seats tremble
with every comma
divine fretful mornings embed
after every word of their weak sentences.
Nobody checks this grammar.
No body objects
or wishes to continue...
You hear the teacher’s ghost scream:
"Bad semantics!"
and you close the window.
Three Scenes, One City
Baghdad 2007

I
Thick forests of cold cement
their trees are planted
by veiled creatures that look like men
and masters of falsehood, flattery and madness.
Flowers didn’t bloom this spring.

II
Demons have their wily rhythms.
They plant bombs
behind every stone
and check our stealthy motion
in offices, markets and classrooms.

III
Poems are engulfed in darkness
and what’s in the street is dull and sullen.
The poet’s heart leans on the solitary lamppost
and his eyes gaze at his famished children.
Nothing

There is nothing else to do now.  
Nothing.  
No road to lose  
or to venture on  
or wall to collide with.  
No water to tame  
or to fathom its mystery.  
No fire to forge  
or to borrow.  
No day to dream of  
or fashion with sun.  
Nothing.  
We spread our silence  
on the edges of time,  
and fall to the sideline  
of the wind.
Insomnia

There again is this intense insomnia
shutting the door behind us.
On her bed
she piles up pebbles
and in a certain corner
of the body of the night,
draws a map for the senses.

Nights are not revealing their mysteries any more.
Nothing is left but figures
we see with closed eyes.
Nothing is left but a deep-black horizon.

"Don't tremble too much
the spirits of the absent are here
dreaming of the life that can be lived" she said.
What's the benefit of this charting of the time?
What's the benefit of listening
to the whimper of this endless waiting?

Our blood is discoloring
what rudeness…

Here, in what is left
of these ruins,
people are crushed,
trampled down like the road…

But like a pine tree
dreaming of mysteries and streams,
we always assume
the fire will recover its youth again

Two heads fall on the pillow.
Water gushes out
underneath the cloak of the night.
In This Mud There is Desire

The storm has come to an end.

There is a wish,  
there is an overwhelming desire  
to surprise time,  
there is a thrilling moment…

We need some water  
for words to wash themselves  
and say their prayers

We need some time  
for orange trees  
to sway as they like

We need some silence  
for virgins to answer  
the call of music

Let seagulls  
emerge from the breast of the earth  
for waves to toss their fringe  
and make a new elixir for life

Give the teardrop time  
for sparrows to have faith in the sun.

Take your talismans,  
priests,  
amulets,  
thick beards  
and psalms

for the memory of tin  
to acquire the softness of water

The storm has come to an end  
The earth lifts an arm  
up to the sky.

In this mud there is desire.
Solid Nights

The solid nights
create a massive silence.
Down fall the wings of the sun
down fall the car bombs
down fall the militias
down fall the military patrols
down fall the checkpoints
down fall the dreamy, peaceful
children's songs
down fall the wives complaints about food rations
down fall the parties
down fall the absurd arguments about
the government of National Unity
down fall the electricity generators
down fall the national electricity
down fall the whispers
down fall the hums
down falls the climax of the little while
down falls the human pottery
and nothing remains
but this silence
reveling all around us.
New Beginning

Take the roaring of the sea
Take your star
Take the dew-dappled archipelagos
Take the planets
Take the orbit
Take the route.
Take this mud
Take small stones
Take these pebbles.
Take this land
Take these palm trees
Take this river
and beware of the nomads.
Beware of the nomads!
Cleave your pomegranates
and sprinkle their seeds on the sphere.
Suckle the wind from a wanton breast
Gather the clouds
Shake their trunks.
Call your herds
Bring them together.
Fall like fresh flowers
on bitter mouths.
Light the fire
And
Undress
undress like this…
Maybe what can't be can be.
Orpheus’ Mistake

O Orpheus, son of Calliope.
You wanted to hum too much
and tattoo your name
on the wrist of your precious ruby

What says the cloud now?

……………………………………..

A woman betrayed you?
You loved her
and she dumped you for a rag merchant.

What rudeness

You set your frangible footsteps on the trail in the maze
carrying your harp
stroking its strings
losing yourself in the tune.
Your melodies scattered on the stones of the road.
And at dawn you sneaked up like the wind
searching for a neutral tulip
and a sheer body.

Your look back killed you.

It’s of no use to know now.
It’s of no use to look from above
at the losing battle.
The Maenads are waiting at the crossroad
licking their fingers
and nothing comes from behind the horizon
except the sound of water.
Assumptions

For Galina…

we shall assume that
when you come,
you will come snow-white
from the cortex of our days
anointing our heads with water
and granting our time more tenderness

we shall assume that
the wind will unbutton its dress
and rub its smooth skin
with rose water
and ambergris
spilling the scent of the breeze
upon our dark complexions

we shall assume that those who have returned
will sift bygone times
so that only the permanent
that which heals the pangs
of love and war
remains.

we shall assume that when
we tell the sea
that its body
is no good for
flirtation
or suckling,
it will propose a truce
with our old boats

we shall assume--just an assumption--
that we’ll sleep on the rooftops of our houses
to cool off the summer heat
that we’ll wake to summer mornings
fragrant with our mothers’ bread

we shall assume that we’ll see our fathers
grow old before our eyes
and that our sons will master their languages
and we’ll say “farewell”
to our loved ones
  when they die.
we shall assume that we will fall in love with women
as bashful as our neighbors
or stroll at ease through unknown neighborhoods
or get drunk in Baghdad or Basra taverns
or light a candle in a church near Babul Muadham
or pass through the gate of wishes at the imam’s shrine
so that the sky will sprinkle us with butterflies
sparkling like the mirrors of his tomb.

or we’ll mourn without fear
with those who mourn Hussein
to purify our souls
to reopen the roads
and bridge the gaps

we shall assume that we will
rename all things
to encourage the believers in the sun
and women will change their night-black garb
for brighter dresses

we shall assume that we will
witness a rosy Euphrates sunrise
the balance of light and darkness changing

we shall assume that you’ll come

we shall assume that

please, don’t let us ... like idiots

come!

Amen.

Translated from the Arabic by the author