

# Mesopotamia's "Paradise Lost": The Destruction of an Oasis of Beauty, Music, Art and Culture

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"They make a desolation and call it peace,

Who is the guardian tonight of the Gates of Paradise?" Agha Shaid Ali, "The Country Without a Post Office", Poems 1991-1995.

"The hand that signed the treaty bred a fever,

And famine grew and locusts came,

Great is the hand that holds Dominion,

Over Man, by a scribbled name." Dylan Thomas, 1914-1953.

It was blogger BlaiseP, on 22nd May (1) who expressed the senseless horror, the destruction of the irreplaceable, in another Iraq tragedy. He wrote of a man he had never met and of a grief despairing, hopeless, immitigable:

"Today I opened the New York Times to read these words by Anthony Hadid, and wept horribly ... I simply cannot express my grief. I sit here ... blowing my nose in to a white washcloth ... I suppose I am merely a maudlin old man, weeping as every other maudlin old man has wept, over the burning of precious things. Once there was hope for intellectual and spiritual reconciliation between my culture and his and it is gone. Something important has died in me..."

He was writing of the destruction of an oasis of beauty, music, art, culture, shaded by scented orange trees, in a quiet street in Baghdad, entirely destroyed by a car bomb on 4th April, but only now noted by a western media outlet. Thirty two more families were bereaved, plunged in to inexpressible grief of a different kind, two hundred injured, ten cars – the precious lifeline of so many – burned and ten nearby homes damaged, businesses destroyed, and likely the owners unable to afford to repair. Vast exposure was given to the damage to four Embassies and a Consulate, the rest were simply more of invasion's collateral damage. The blood of enfranchisement, US style, along with the tears, it seems, will never stop flowing.

The destroyed house had belonged to Jabra Ibrahim Jabra. Poet, novelist, critic, translator extraordinary, artist, passionate music lover, ever listening to soaring melodies, or soothing arrangements, as he wrote and worked. One colleague remembers him writing whilst listening to Brahms, whilst Roger Allen, Professor of Arabic literature at the University of

Pennsylvania, friend and translating collaborator, recalls him requesting, prior to a visit by Allen to Baghdad: "Any music you bring along will make me happy – especially 18th century and earlier ... it is literally my daily bread. It sustains my mind when I am writing."

Jabra was an astonishingly prolific wordsmith and scholar. Author and translator of perhaps seventy books. His own work has been translated in to over twelve languages. He transformed T.S. Elliot, William Faulkner, Oscar Wilde, Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot", in to arabic, with fourteen articles by American critics on poet Dylan Thomas. His truly gargantuan labour of love was bringing Shakespeare : Hamlet, King Lear, Macbeth, Coriolanus, The Tempest, Twelfth Night also to the arabic language.

Jabra has been described as an early "Arab intellectual pioneer" supporting modernity, which – given the glittering wealth of soaring creativity across the artistic spectrum, ancient and modern – may be a little selective, but he was certainly one of the most prolific, of consistent, shimmering achievement. He, as so many, carried his exile in his soul and his writings, yet seemingly, though yearnings germinated and flowered in his words, never bitterness. A line from his novel: "In Search of Walid Massoud", it is possible to speculate, reflected his philosophy: "... rejecting the laws and customs that were found to be incompatible with this absolute love and like an unknown bird, in unknown heavens ... within the setting of my isolation from everything, I would actually, paradoxically, be in touch with my love of everything."

Born in Bethlehem, in 1919 or 1920 in poverty but much love, of Syriac Orthodox background, his senior school was Jerusalem's Arabic College, in 1932, where he studied English, Arabic and the Syriac languages. A scholarship to Cambridge University, saw him return to Jerusalem with a Master's Degree in English literature, to lecture at Al Rashidiya College and teach art at his former school, Al Rashidiya Secondary School. Having cherished painting since childhood, he also founded the Jerusalem Arts Club.

Not yet thirty, displaced, with seven hundred thousand others, on the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948, the Nakba (catastrophe) for Palestinians, he left for Baghdad. Before being awarded a scholarship to Harvard University in 1952, he taught English literature at Baghdad University and, ironically, worked with the British archeology mission. Britain's edicts wrote Palestine's destruction, whilst they studied "ancient cultures and physical remains", geographically a few hours down the down the eastern road, in Iraq.

Returning from the States to Baghdad in 1954, Jabra packed the decade, working for the National Oil Company, involved in several documentaries, founding the Baghdad Contemporary Art Group, becoming Editor in Chief of Arabic Art magazine and President of Iraq's Art Critics Association, whilst continuing lecturing at Baghdad University and Queen Aliyah College until 1964.

He built a house in which he lived for the rest of his life. "Rarely have a house and a man seemed to intersect so seamlessly", with paintings by superb Iraqi artists, such as Rakan Dabdoub, Nouri al-Rawi and Souad al-Attar – whose equally talented sister Laila and her husband, were killed by a US missile, at their home and studio, on 27th June, 1993.

"(Jabra's) house was a gallery of Iraqi art", says friend and fellow critic, Majed al-Sammarrai.(2)

I met Jabra just once, in Baghdad, in 1994, at dinner with friends. He left an indelible

memory. Late in the evening, he invited me to his home, truly the window of his soul. It was to touch and breathe beauty. Sculptures by his friend the internationally renowned Mohammed Ghani, who had also been at the dinner (now in exile, courtesy liberation) graced alcoves. Books and plants ran riot. I wandered from room to room, in this house of someone encountered just hours before, knowing each space, each wall, would hold something more uniquely superb – then apologising for my intrusion, moving on again, compelled, truly spellbound. As I stopped, gazed, he would explain the provenance, background, of each piece, painting, creation.

He took me into the courtyard round which the house was built, and we sat on a low wall, the night balmy, the tiles in their creams and near turquoise glistening under the light of a carpet of stars, the scent of the citrus trees, which graced the palette of another wonderful space. He talked of the forty two day 1991 bombardment. It was hard to imagine one so seeped in aestheticism in the true sense, with such gentleness and reverence of beauty, surviving such violence, violation, destruction, deafening, death delivering bombardment. How did he? I asked.

He smiled and said that his small grandson had been given a Walkman, just before the onslaught: “I used to sit here in the night and listen to Brahms, Beethoven, Chopin, Mozart, Elgar ... watching the missile tracers – and say to myself that nations who can create such beauty cannot be all bad.” There are rare encounters that remain, that the memory revisits, for all time. Jabra was such a one.

“Write to me”, he said, as I left. I did, but there was no reply. I put it down to the ridiculous UN embargo games with Iraq’s mail, as all else. Six months later, back in Iraq I asked my friend, the hostess of the dinner party, how he was. “He died”, she said, of someone very dear to her family. Her voice closed the door to further questions, Iraq was swamped in heartbreak and deaths from ongoing bombings and “embargo related causes.” Jabra died on 11th December 1994.

On his death, Raziya Ibrahim, a relative became custodian of the house: ‘ “Jabra’s treasures are in your hands”, Majed al-Sammaraï remembers telling her.’ (3) She and her son were killed in the blast, her decapitated body recovered a day later, from the blood spattered ruins.

It seems ten thousand letters were largely destroyed, a photograph from Baghdad University remains, with students wearing mini-skirts. Demonised Saddam Hussein’s secular Iraq an age away from the fundamentalist “New Iraq”, ushered in by the invasion. The house was looted, of anything of value undamaged – including Mrs Ibrahim’s jewellery. Surviving books were ignored: Henry James “Portrait of a Lady”, George Antonius’s definitive “The Arab Awakening” and, notes “feedcry” (see below) “A copy of Bulfinch’s Mythology lay open at a line of poetry: ‘O, think how, to his latest day, when death just hovering, claimed his pray.’ “

In his remarkable review of Jabra’s autobiography : “The First Well: A Bethlehem Boyhood”, Vered Lee writes of Jabra’s belief that the “First well” of childhood, the first sights, sounds, joys, sorrows, yearning and fears are also the well of awareness, understanding. Every time he reflects on them, “.. he drinks from a fountain of permanent abundance, arising from the innermost depth of his humanity.” Jabra, writes Lee: “... draws on loveliness, kindness and simplicity, that flow on to the pages of his book ... scenes of poverty are pervaded by flashes of love of human beings and a delicate humour that create a moving slice of life ...”

his childhood is crowned “as the hero ... the clearest and most moving memories have to do with the encounter with the written word, childhood songs and the books that were etched in his heart. Jabra reconstructs his longing for a notebook and how the first time he held a pencil in his untrained hand, his tongue tasted its tip as he began to write.”

The childhood left behind in the land of his birth was not uprooted from his heart, assuaging the the displaced soul and its longings. (4)

This latest tragedy in what remains of Mesopotamia’s great, unique cultural heritage, the house he built on Princesses Street now rubble, the scented, guardian, orange trees, planted in memory of Palestine, now burned and charred, the beauty erased, the star gifted courtyard no more, is too, now, encapsulated in Jabra’s poem: “In the Deserts of Exile” :

“Oh land of ours where our childhood passed

... in the shade of the orange-grove,

Among the almond trees in the valleys -

Remember us now wandering

...

They crushed the flowers on the hills around us,

Destroyed the houses over our heads

Scattered our torn remains

Then unfolded the desert before us,

With valleys writhing in hunger

And blue shadows shattered in to red thorns,

Bent over corpses left as prey for falcon and crow.

Remembering the childhood “well” he concludes:

Is it from your hills that the angels sang to the shepherds

Of peace on earth and goodwill among men?

Only death laughed when it saw

Among the entrails of beasts

The ribs of men,

And through the guffaws of bullets

It went dancing a joyous dance

On the heads of weeping women.

Our land is emerald,  
But in the deserts of exile,  
Spring after spring,  
Only the dust hisses in our face.  
What then, what are we doing with out love?  
When our eyes and our mouth are full of dust? (5)

Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, exiled from the hills where “the angels sang to the shepherds”, died and his legacy destroyed, in the land of the Garden of Eden and of Abraham, Father of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. And the House on Princesses Street, another Paradise Lost, in another spring.

#### Notes

1. <http://theforvm.org>
2. <http://www.feedcry.com/archive/aid/725431>
3. ibid
4. <http://www.haaretz.com/culture/books/barefoot-in-bethlehem-1.115956>
5. <Http://arablit.wordpress.com/2010/05/24/remembering-jabra-ibrahim-jabra/>

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