

# The Liberal – April 2007

## The Poetics of Freedom

by Joanna Tatchell

IT was a contact in Stockholm who first alerted Nabeel Yasin to the weblog in May this year. “There is a posting from a man named Abdul Karim Kadum”, he warned in an email. “You won’t like what’s in there, but it’s something you must read”.

Nabeel, the celebrated Iraqi poet who had escaped a Ba’athist death sentence in 1980, wondered uneasily about the connection; he had been out of Iraq for quarter of a century and, and as far as he could recall, had never met a man by that name. But as he read the extraordinary thread of web-postings, Nabeel experienced a growing sense of horror as his own unwitting role in Abdul Karim’s terrible misfortune became clear.

Karim had been an ordinary soldier, conscripted by the Ba’athist military and sent to the frontline during the Iran/Iraq conflict. As a punishment for being Shia, he was dispatched to what was known as ‘the oven of the war’, the bloody front in south-eastern Iraq between Basra and the Shatt al-Arab. Here, fertile terrain had been churned to a toxic wasteland and poorly equipped troops were entrenched in a grim war of attrition, counting thousands of casualties each day. Knowing from the few who returned alive what trials lay ahead, Karim took a great personal risk: he smuggled in with him his most precious volume of poems, a collection entitled *The Poets Satirise the King*. This book, he hoped, would provide solace during his time in Infantry Brigade No. 703, and over the weeks and months that followed he clandestinely read it while others prayed. Karim’s favourite piece of verse, a short seven-line poem called ‘In Camera’, became a talisman – as

his brigade comrades were slaughtered in droves, he somehow managed to survive the shelling and miles of landmines that surrounded them. Around the edges of the pages he scribbled thoughts and half-formed lines of verse about his own predicament. But this outlet was to cost him dearly; while on a secondment to Baghdad, suspicious officers ransacked his quarters and discovered the well-worn book hidden amongst his army issue.

They issued an immediate warrant for his arrest – the book by Nabeel Yasin was at the top of Saddam Hussein’s infamous blacklist of banned, subversive literature (this list included such notables as Virginia Woolf, Jean-Paul Sartre and Tin Tin).

Accused of high treason, Abdul Karim was sentenced by the central Military Court to ten years in an army jail. Aware that an Iraqi military prison was possibly the only place on earth worse than the front from which he had been plucked, he managed to execute a successful escape plan and disappear into hiding. But the army was not about to let up; desperate to reclaim their prisoner, they lured him out with the promise of an amnesty. When the naïve Abdul Karim took them at their word and emerged from hiding, he found the promise empty, and after a swift retrial was thrown into the notorious Kumeit Central jail. This vast complex – one of Iraq’s most brutal military prisons – was marooned in the desert in the south-west of the country beyond the reach of law. In a daily round of torture and deprivation, no one was expected to emerge alive.

Nabeel could barely believe what he read, and the final part of the posting – in which Karim addressed Nabeel directly – unsettled him most. *“In the end I should praise and thank those Ba’athist thugs. I should celebrate being imprisoned in that terrible jail. Why? Because it gave me the most wonderful gift – an opportunity now to reach out for you in person”*.

Nabeel was profoundly shaken: “What words should I have for a man who has been robbed of ten years of his life for reading a poem I wrote? The subject of ‘In Camera’ was suffocation. I wrote it in a safehouse while I was

on the run from Ba'athist militia. I knew it was dangerous for me to write, but I didn't know that later it could ruin other men's lives".

Karim Kadum survived, if only just, and had found safety in Germany, which was at least some cause for relief. But the discovery of his plight raised a serious moral question for Nabeel. "I began wondering if there were other men like him, who had suffered for my work. And if there were, should I ever have written at all? What use are poems about freedom, if people suffer the opposite fate because of it?".

Of course, Karim would have understood the mortal risk of being caught with banned literature. But this only served to reinforce the personal imperative of anyone seeking out such books. Like those in the Czech Republic who had held Lou Reed and the Velvet Underground close to their hearts, Nabeel's own epic 'Brother Yasin' had been held up as a symbol of freedom for the Iraqi underground resistance during the struggles of the '80s and '90s. Back in the early days of the Ba'athist regime, Nabeel and his brothers had amassed their own library of banned books, including Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Marx and Neruda. When his elder brother was imprisoned for the first time, Nabeel had buried the entire collection in the yard in an attempt to save his sibling's life.

Galvanised by Karim's openheartedness, Nabeel wrote back without pausing to tailor his response. "*My dear Karim. I ask myself just one question. What can I do for Abdul Karim Kadum? I must collect myself, my thoughts, my poems, my history and my memories, and after gathering them up, I will come to Stuttgart, to where Karim is. And I will kiss the place where they beat you*". This heartfelt missive was the beginning of a dialogue between the two men that grew into a steady correspondence of one or two emails a week. The pair have become friends, speaking as equals on the subject of their homeland and its people.

With Nabeel's encouragement, Karim is beginning to write his own poetry, and by focusing on this shared passion they are helping to create an

alternative to the shattered Iraqi experience. It has also proved to be a way for Nabeel to atone for this suffering: “Reading my friend Abdul Karim’s first drafts and helping him refine them has allowed me to make amends for what happened. For weeks after I first read Karim’s story I was unable to sleep. Depression and guilt dogged me. Now poetry has become a bridge out of the past”.

For Abdul Karim, too, the friendship has added an important dimension to life in exile in Germany. Nabeel is no longer a literary hero, but an active friend and mentor, offering the insights and warmth of true friendship.

*“Abdul Karim, the poem you sent me is much improved but you should build a layer of myth into the narrative...soon I plan to go and meet my brothers in Frankfurt... when I am in Germany we should meet, and take coffee together and talk about all these things”.*

In such everyday exchanges the two men have demonstrated that it is possible to avoid a thirst for vengeance for the injustices of past suffering. In his very first letter, Karim had implored Nabeel not to apologise: *“I feel no pain. Please, also, feel no guilt. We have left all this behind”*. Nabeel appreciates this compassion, and believes in the importance of returning to the arts, to poetry and painting and literature: “Art provides a means for others to both assuage and express their suffering. And Iraq has always been a nation of poets”. He notes that encouraging artistic expression among a youth that has never known freedom offers a means of nurturing hope and creating dialogue; of giving the aimless young a constructive purpose and a pride not based on battle creed. And there are many from Iraq who are already doing just this; letting go of a past they cannot change and choosing to restore instead that priceless currency that both the Ba’athists and the current bloody disarray have sucked away: individual freedom of expression and the prospect of a brighter future.