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Cover by Sebastiano Buonamico	

The pictures. On the front cover: Gaza, 5 March, Yousuf licks the wooden spoon of the cake for his second birthday. On the back cover, above: Gaza, 24 January, signs in front of a polling center: no guns, no cigarettes, no cell phones; below: Gaza, 18 January, a wall plastered with campaign posters. Photos by Laila El-Haddad.

Something—those who know our magazine will already have noticed—is missing from this issue of “Here”: its spine, i.e. what allows you to put it away on a shelf next to other magazines or books and pick it out immediately. We know it is a shame. There is an advantage in this though: pages will no longer come off, as a few readers said it happened with the latest issue. Moreover, we will save a lot of money (and we are indeed struggling financially).

This review exists through the voices it gives expression to, in their variety. All contributions are welcome. Please write to **Here -notes from the present, via Bastia 11, 20139 Milano, Italy, phone -fax 0039-02-57406574, email: massimo.parizzi@alice.it.**

Diary: January to April 2006

Here

notes from the present

Gaza, January 2

Laila El-Haddad

I finally got myself to put Yousuf in a nursery. Not because I needed someone to watch him, but because I wanted him to be exposed to some other children his age a few times a week. I realized the time had come for him to make contact with the outside world when he began banging his head against our kitchen wall in a state of advanced boredom. I'm kidding of course. But really, the kid needs some friends. So I searched and searched, and the more nurseries I saw the more worried I got. Gaza doesn't exactly have the best child care centers, to put it mildly [...]. Until finally I found a cute and clean little place nearby that only takes a limited number of children to avoid overcrowding (and doesn't resort to sedating toddlers with food and sleep to keep them inactive). Today is officially his second day, and he's loving it, perhaps more than I. I miss his morning banter and desperate pleas to rescue him from my mother as I'm working by my desk. But I'm sure it's for the best. [...]

I'm working late tonight, and as I'm typing, I can hear helicopter gunships hovering above my

apartment in Gaza City. They are not distant, but rather directly overhead. I'm waiting for an inevitable missile to go flying over our house. So far, that hasn't happened, but the signs do not bode well. Last night, the booms continued at odd hours of the night. One shortly after two, another after 6 am.

Here come the helicopters again, better duck and cover just in case... and brace for the night ahead.

Gaza, January 3

Laila El-Haddad

I made it safely through the night, I'm pleased to report. The Apaches eventually dispersed, perhaps after being unable to find their intended target. For them to be hovering so low over Gaza City's Remal neighbourhood was rather unusual, and very frightening.

Instead, I woke to the marching of campaigning Palestinians with their various accessories, including megaphones blasting out campaign messages, and drums being banged about throughout the streets. One group even had two clowns and a *dabke* [folk dance, often performed at weddings] group: like a parade, which Yousuf enjoyed thoroughly.

Today, of course, I was reminded rather intrusively, marked the first official day of legislative council election campaigning. Gaza's main city square was literally plastered with posters and banners hanging every which way which sprung up almost over night. Some were for local independent candidates promising to "serve Gaza's people". But the most prominent banners so far

January 3. Iran announces the resumption of its production of fuel for nuclear plants. It is the beginning of mounting tension between Iran on the one side and the United States and the EU on the other.

January 4. Israeli Premier Ariel Sharon suffers a stroke. Ehud Olmert succeeds him as head of the government.

were those of Hamas, which is clearly building its campaign on its reputation of honesty and its promise to combat corruption, all while standing up to Israel (their election insignia is “a hand that builds, and a hand that struggles/resists”).

As one of their banners read (roughly translated), “*al-Islah* (reform, and also the name of their party) means security, and our party means guarantees”. Another banner stated simply: “Hamas: Faith. Work. Change. Reform”. An election float of theirs traveling through Gaza city declared by megaphone: “Vote for List 3, the List of the Inner Jihad”, a reference to the struggle for self and societal reform and improvement, as advised by the Prophet Mohammad.

Also making a prominent showing was Mustafa Barghouthi’s “Independent” party list which is building its campaign on similar promises of combating corruption and providing a just and democratic alternative to the ruling party (though they are not nearly as popular as Hamas, they do seem to have a lot of campaigning money).

I haven’t yet seen Fateh start full-fledged campaigning, though given their reputation for over the top fanfare and excessive spending in past (municipal) elections, it should be big and interesting (to see how they will combat their increasingly sour reputation). [...]

Baghdad, January 12

R.

When I first heard about the abduction of “Christian Science Monitor” journalist Jill Carroll a week ago, I remember feeling regret. It was the same heavy feeling I get every time I hear of an-

Kidnapped in Baghdad on January 7, Jill Carroll will be freed on March 30.

other journalist killed or abducted. The same heavy feeling that settles upon most Iraqis, I imagine, when they hear of acquaintances suffering under the current situation.

I read the news as a subtitle on TV. We haven't had an internet connection for several days so I couldn't really read about the details. All I knew was that a journalist had been abducted and that her Iraqi interpreter had been killed. He was shot in cold blood in Al Adil district earlier this month, when they took Jill Carroll... They say he didn't die immediately. It is said he lived long enough to talk to police and then he died.

I found out very recently that the interpreter killed was a good friend, Alan, of *Alan's Melody*, and I've spent the last two days crying.

Everyone knew him as simply 'Alan', or 'Elin' as it is pronounced in Iraqi Arabic. Prior to the war, he owned a music shop in the best area in Baghdad, A'arasat. He sold some Arabic music and instrumental music, but he had his regular customers: those westernized Iraqis who craved foreign music. For those of us who listened to rock, adult alternative, jazz, etc. he had very few rivals.

He sold bootleg CDs, tapes and DVDs. His shop wasn't just a music shop: it was a haven. Some of my happiest moments were while I was walking out of that shop carrying CDs and tapes, full of anticipation for the escape the music provided. He had just about everything from Abba to Marilyn Manson. He could provide anything. All you had to do was go to him with the words: "Alan, I heard a great song on the radio... you have to find it!". And he'd sit there, patiently, asking: "Who sang it? You don't know?"

Ok, was it a man or a woman? Fine. Do you remember any of the words?”. Chances were that he’d already heard it and even knew some of the lyrics.

Under the sanctions, Iraq was virtually cut off from the outside world. We had maybe four or five local TV stations and it was only in later years that the internet became more popular. Alan was one of those links with the outside world. Walking into Alan’s shop was like walking into a sort of transitional other world. Whenever you walked into the store, great music would be blaring from his speakers and he and Mohammed, the guy who worked in his shop, would be arguing over who was better, Joe Satriani or Steve Vai.

He would have the latest Billboard hits posted on a sheet of paper near the door and he’d have compiled a few of his own favorites on a ‘collection’ CD. He also went out of his way to get recordings of the latest award shows: Grammys, AMAs, Oscars, etc. You could visit him twice and know that by the third time, he’d have memorized your favorites and found music you might be interested in.

He was an electrical engineer, but his passion was music. His dream was to be a music producer. He was always full of scorn for the usual boy bands—N’Sync, Backstreet Boys, etc.—but he was always trying to promote an Iraqi boy band he claimed he’d discovered, “Unknown to No One”. “They’re great, *wallah*, they have potential,” he’d say. E. would answer: “Alan, they’re terrible”. And Alan, with his usual Iraqi pride would lecture about how they were great, simply because they were Iraqi.

He was a Christian from Basrah and he had a

lovely wife who adored him, F. We would tease him about how once he was married and had a family, he'd lose interest in music. It didn't happen. Conversations with Alan continued to revolve around Pink Floyd, Jimmy Hendrix, but they began to include F., his wife, M., his daughter, and his little boy. My heart aches for his family, his wife and children...

You could walk into the shop and find no one behind the counter: everyone was in the other room, playing one version or another of FIFA soccer on the Play Station. He collected those old records, or 'vinyls'. The older they were, the better. While he promoted new musical technology, he always said that nothing could beat the sound of a vintage vinyl.

We didn't go to Alan just to buy music. It always turned into a social visit. He'd make you sit down, listen to his latest favorite CD and drink something. Then he'd tell you the latest gossip; he knew it all. He knew where all the parties were, who the best DJs were and who was getting married or divorced. He knew the local gossip and the international gossip, but it was never malicious with Alan. It was always the funny sort.

The most important thing about Alan was that he never let you down. Never. Whatever it was that you wanted, he'd try his hardest to get it. If you became his friend, that didn't just include music: he was ready to lend a helping hand to those in need, whether it was just to give advice, or listen after a complicated, difficult week.

After the war, the area he had his shop in deteriorated. There were car bombs and shootings and the Badr people [the Shiite military forces

of the SCIRI, Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq] took over some of the houses there. People went to A'arasat less and less because it was too dangerous. His shop was closed up more than it was open. He shut it up permanently after getting death threats and a hand grenade through his shop window. His car was carjacked at some point and he was shot at so he started driving around in his father's beaten-up old Toyota Cressida with a picture of Sistani [the ayatollah who is a point of reference for the Shiites] on his back window, "to ward off the fanatics...". He winked and grinned.

E. and I would stop by his shop sometimes after the war, before he shut it down. We went in once and found that there was no electricity, and no generator. The shop was dimly lit with some sort of fuel lamp and Alan was sitting behind the counter, sorting through CDs. He was ecstatic to see us. There was no way we could listen to music so he and E. sang through some of their favorite songs, stumbling upon the lyrics and making things up along the way. Then we started listening to various ring tones and swapping the latest jokes of the day. Before we knew it, two hours had slipped by and the world outside was forgotten, an occasional explosion bringing us back to reality.

It hit me then that it wasn't the music that made Alan's shop a haven—somewhere to forget problems and worries—it was Alan himself.

He loved Pink Floyd: "Did you see the frightened ones? / Did you hear the falling bombs? / Did you ever wonder why we / Had to run for shelter when the / Promise of a brave, new world / Unfurled beneath the clear blue sky? / Did you

see the frightened ones? / Did you hear the falling bombs? / The flames are all long gone, but the pain lingers on. / Goodbye, blue sky / Goodbye, blue sky. / Goodbye. Goodbye.
Goodbye Alan...

Gaza, January 24

Laila El-Haddad

With less than 12 hours left before voting begins, Palestinian security and international observers have deployed, campaigning has (finally!) ended, and everyone is waiting in anticipation for the big day to finally be over with already!

To help the voting process go smoothly, the Central Elections Committee published a page-long ad explaining to voters how to properly cast their ballot. The ABCs of Palestinian voting, if you will. Any aberrations, they warned, will disqualify it.

Only a check or an X may be used to indicate the preferred choice in the boxes provided. No other marks, such as say, an O, may be used. No double Xs, as in XX. No multiple choices. No unstamped ballot sheets. No comments of any sort on the ballot. And finally, no checks or X's outside of the designated 'X box'. Is everyone keeping track here?

To simplify matters, each list or individual nominee is designated with a symbol next to it, such as palm trees, crescents, hearts, spades, etc. Ok, sounds simple enough, if not dumbed down, but in the days of hanging and dimpled chads you never can be too careful. Especially given that a poll released today showed 3.3% of the participants cast blank ballots.

Personally, I just want the elections to be over and done with. Our walls have been disfigured. Our privacy invaded (recently with SMS messages). And Gaza resembles a horribly decorated circus (I pity the custodial workers come Thursday morning), what with the banners, flags, and incessant campaign trolleys perusing down the city streets, blasting music and messages. Yallah khalsoona! (translation: get it over with already!)

Gaza, January 25

Laila El-Haddad

As I write this post, testosterone charged Fateh hooligans have taken to celebrating in the streets, honking horns, flying their trademark yellow flags, and shooting into the air (one bullet just nicked our family room window). Initial exit polls show Fateh with a narrow lead in the national districts, but pollster Shikaki says it's very possible they will not form a majority. Either way, it's pertinent to remember the significance of all this: that Fateh and Hamas have nearly split the vote in half. I think both parties will be pleased because Hamas doesn't want to be a majority and have to make the difficult decisions.

A little on the voting itself: my finger looks horribly bruised (according to Yousuf, who asks "wa wa? wa wa?", meaning "is it hurt?", every time he sees it). I tried to convince the election worker to only put the tip of my finger in that dreadful ink, but she dunked the whole thing in there. All tricks to make the ink removal easier failed to work (clear nail polish painted on before the voting; Vaseline, etc.).

January 25. Political elections in Palestine. Hamas wins absolute majority.

The election workers—more like election m-
zis—were taking their jobs very seriously, which
was good up to a point. Sometimes I felt they
focussed too much on procedure, too little on
actually helping voters who may have been con-
fused. At one point I put my ballot into the box,
and didn't fold it, and got yelled at in front of
everyone: "No, no, you *must* fold it; stop". I felt
like I was carrying a bomb all of a sudden, and
got very nervous, and finally the man calmed me
down: "It's ok, just go slooowly, take your time".

Gaza, January 27

Laila El-Haddad

Minutes after the official results were announced
last night, the street erupted in celebration, with
 Hamas supporters and others taking to the streets,
 honking horns, handing out sweets, lighting fire-
 works in the overcast sky.

It was clear that no one, no one expected them to
 win. Strolling around the streets at night, it also
 became obvious, on a very basic level, *why* peo-
 ple voted for Hamas. Forget about the political
 horizon (or lack thereof) for a moment. I was
 speaking to a storeowner about the results, when
 a friend of his burst in, beside himself. "Did you
 hear? Did you hear? I couldn't sleep all night. I
 can't believe it!" He was a municipality employee
 who barely made enough money to feed his fami-
 ly. His son had been injured in internal clashes
 six months ago, his groin muscles torn, and dis-
 abled, sitting at home immobile. For six months,
 he has been chasing the Palestinian Authority for
 some medical compensation, and hasn't received

*The Attorney-General
 of the Palestinian Na-
 tional Authority re-
 leases results of a sur-
 vey according to which
 in the last five years at
 least 700 million dol-
 lars have been squan-
 dered or stolen from
 the PNA by corrupt
 bureaucrats or politi-
 cians (the PNA annual
 balance is 1 billion,
 200 million dollars).
 So far financial scan-
 dals have led to the ar-
 rest of 25 Palestinian
 executives and to the
 flight of another 10
 towards foreign coun-
 tries.*

a penny, “while those nobodies travel around in their BMWs. Is that fair, tell me?”. [...]

Fateh supporters were hardly celebrating. Their reactions ranged from shock, to denial, to bitterness and arrogance and humiliation, and finally lashing out against their own corrupt leaders tonight.

Yesterday, I spoke to Taha Nabil, a 25-year-old police officer in the bloated Palestinian security forces whose functioning is likely to be streamlined by the new Hamas government. He expressed his concern for the future and his shock that what he called a newcomer like Hamas could win so overwhelmingly. “I see all these celebrations, and, well... I just hope it’s for the best,” he said, fireworks blasting all around him. “Since I’m a police officer and a Fatah supporter, I am not very happy about the results. I just hope the fruits of the victory will not be exclusively for one party or people. Who is Hamas anyway? We were the ones who began the revolution. Hamas has only been around for ten years, and suddenly, out of nowhere, they changed Gaza.” The question that Nabil and other Fatehawis are asking themselves tonight is “how and why”.

Tonight, Fateh lashed out in a very different way. Young supporters, known as ‘shabeeba’ here or ‘shabeebit Fateh’ swarmed Mahmud Abbas’s [Abu Mazen] house, calling for his resignation in three days, and blaming the ‘old guard’ of the Fateh leadership and their corruption for their crushing defeat. They then swarmed the legislative council, where they created bonfires out of government vans, scaled the walls of the building, and ripped out air conditioners. [...]

Gaza, January 28

Laila El-Haddad

This is a brief post whose purpose is to serve as a memorial for a little girl who has received scarce if any mention in the preoccupied media in recent days. Her name was Aya al-Astal. Aya was 13 years old. Aya was carrying a basket, and got lost on her way back home to the Qarara area of south-central Gaza on Thursday, not far from the border fence with Israel. Israeli occupation forces shot her four times with live ammunition, two rounds at least hitting her in the neck, after suspecting she was a dangerous terrorist (their defense: “She got close to the fence”). But the media was too busy covering the “political earthquake that shook the region”. Four bullets. To the neck. This from arguably the most sophisticated army in the world. Apparently, the soldiers mistook her basket for a bomb. Binoculars, anyone? Medics found her body, riddled with bullets, hours after she had been murdered. May you rest in peace little Aya. May you rest in peace.

Baghdad, February 2

R.

Iraqi election results were officially announced nearly two weeks ago, but it was apparent from the day of elections which political parties would come out on top. I’m not even going to bother listing the different types of election fraud witnessed all over Iraq: it’s a tedious subject and one we’ve been discussing for well over a month. The fact that a Shi’a, Iran-influenced religious list came out on top is hardly surprising. I’m sur-

February. Satirical cartoons of Muhammad published in a Danish newspaper in September last year give rise to an ever growing number of disorderly protest demonstrations which spread throughout the Muslim world and cause the death of dozens.

prised, however, at Iraqis who seem to be astonished at the outcome. Didn't we, over the last three years, see this coming? Iranian influenced clerics had a strong hold right from 2003. Their militias were almost instantly incorporated into the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defense as soon a move was made to create new Iraqi security forces. Sistani has been promoting them from day one.

Why is it so very surprising that in times of calamity people turn to religion? It happens all over the world. During tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes, blockades, wars, people turn to deities... It's simple, when all else fails, there is always a higher power for most people.

After nearly three years of a failing occupation, I personally believe that many Iraqis voted for religious groups because it was counted as a vote against America and the occupation itself. No matter what American policy makers say to their own public, and no matter how many pictures Rumsfeld and Condi take with our fawning politicians: most Iraqis do not trust Americans. America as a whole is viewed as a devilish country that is, at best, full of self-serving mischief towards lesser countries and, at worst, an implementer of sanctions, and a warmongering invader. Even Iraqis who believe America is here to help (and they seem to have grown fewer in number these days), believe that it helps not out of love for Iraqis, but out of self-interest and greed.

Shi'a religious parties, like SCIRI and Da'awa, have decidedly changed their tone in the last year. During 2003, they were friends of America, they owed the US their current power inside of the country. Today, as Iraqis are becoming more

impatient with the American presence inside of Iraq, they are claiming that they will be the end of the “occupiers”. They openly blame the Americans for the lack of security and general chaos. The message is quite different. In 2003, there was general talk of a secular Iraq; today, that no longer seems to be an option.

In 2003, Ja’affari [the current Prime Minister and leader of the *Unified Iraqi Coalition List*, i.e. the pro-Iran coalition that won the elections on December 15, 2005] was claiming he didn’t want to see Iraqi women losing their rights, etc. He never mentioned equal rights, but he did throw in a word here and there about how Iraqi women had a right to an education and even a job. I was changing channels a couple of weeks ago and I came across Ja’affari speaking to students from Mustansiriyah University, one of Iraq’s largest universities, with campuses in several areas in Baghdad. I couldn’t see the students; he might have been speaking with a group of penguins, for all I could tell. The camera was focused on him: his shifty eyes and low, mumbling voice. On his right sat an Ayatollah with a black turban and black robes. He looked stern and he nodded with satisfaction as Ja’affari spoke to the students (or penguins). His speech wasn’t about science, technology or even development: it was a religious sermon about heaven and hell, good and evil.

I noticed two things immediately. The first was that he seemed to be speaking to only male students. There were no females in the audience. He spoke of their female ‘sisters’ in absentia, as if they had absolutely no representation in the gathering. The second thing was that he seemed to be speaking to only Shi’a because he kept mention-

ing their ‘Sunni brothers’, as if they too were absent. He sermonized about how the men should take care of the women and how Sunnis weren’t bad at all. I waited to hear him speak about Iraqi unity, and the need to not make religious distinctions: those words never came.

In spite of all this, pro-war Republicans remain inanely hopeful. “Ah well, so Ayatollahs won out this election; the next election will be better!” But there is a problem... The problem with religious parties and leaders in a country like Iraq is that they control a following of fervent believers, not just political supporters. For followers of Da’awa and SCIRI, for example, it’s not about the policy or the promises or the puppet in power. It’s like the pope for devout Catholics: you don’t question the man in the chair because he is there by divine right, almost. You certainly don’t question his policies.

Ayatollahs are like that. Moqtada al-Sadr [the mullah who is the leader of the Shiites’ radical wing] is ridiculous. He talks like his tongue is swollen up in his mouth and he always looks like he needs to bathe. He speaks with an intonation that indicates a fluency in Farsi [Persian] and yet... he commands an army of followers because his grandfather was a huge religious figure. He could be the least educated, least enlightened man in the country and he’d still have people willing to lay down their lives at his command because of his family’s religious history. (Lucky Americans: he announced a week ago that should Iran come under US attack, he and his followers would personally rise up to Iran’s defense.)

At the end of the day, people who follow these

figures tell themselves that even if the current leader isn't up to par, the goal and message remain the same: religion, God's word as law. When living in the midst of a war-torn country with a situation that is deteriorating and death around every corner, you turn to God because Ayad Al-lawi [former interim prime minister] couldn't get you electricity and security; he certainly isn't going to get you into heaven should you come face to face with a car bomb.

The trouble with having a religious party in power in a country as diverse as Iraq is that you automatically alienate everyone not of that particular sect or religion. Religion is personal, it is something you are virtually born into... it belongs to the heart, the mind, the spirit; and while it is welcome in day to day dealings, it shouldn't be politicized.

Theocracies (and we seem to be standing on the verge of an Iranian influenced one) grow stronger with time because you cannot argue religion. Politicians are no longer politicians: they are Ayatollahs, they become modern-day envoys of God, to be worshipped, not simply respected. You cannot challenge them because for their followers, that is a challenge to a belief, not a person or a political party. You go from being a critic or 'opposition' to simply being a heathen when you argue with religious parties.

Americans write to me wondering: "But where are the educated Iraqis? Why didn't they vote for secular parties?". The educated Iraqis have been systematically silenced since 2003. They've been pressured and bullied outside of the country. They've been assassinated, detained, tortured and abducted. Many of them have lost

faith in the possibility of a secular Iraq. Then again... who is to say that many of the people who voted for religious parties aren't educated? I know some perfectly educated Iraqis who take criticism towards parties like Da'awa and SCIRI as a personal affront. This is because these parties are so cloaked and cocooned within their religious identity that it is almost taken as an attack against Shi'a in general when one criticizes them. It's the same thing for many Sunnis when a political Sunni party comes under criticism. That's the danger of mixing politics and religion: it becomes personal.

I try not to dwell on the results too much—the fact that Shi'a religious fundamentalists are currently in power—because when I do, I'm filled with this sort of chill that leaves in its wake a feeling of quiet terror. It's like when the electricity goes out suddenly and you're plunged into a deep, quiet, almost tangible darkness: you try not to focus too intently on the subtle noises and movements around you because the unseen possibilities will drive you mad...

Gaza, February 2

Laila El-Haddad

I bet you never expected me to mention breastfeeding and Israeli closures in the same sentence. Well, I just did. Now, for the readers who didn't just drop like flies, I'll continue.

Israel has closed the al-Muntar/Karni commercial crossing, Gaza's commercial lifeline to the world, for coming on a month now, as fruit, vegetables and flowers destined for export to European markets spoil, and medicines (including vac-

February. Protest demonstrations start spreading throughout France against the CPE (First Employment Contract), which would allow companies to fire employees within two years from hiring without giving a reason. The CPE is revoked on April 10.

cinations and kidney dialysis fluid), dairy products, sugar, rice and infant formula dwindle on Gaza's supermarket shelves. [...]

I then spoke to a friend who works at a human rights organization that subsequently released a press release on the matter. He asked how Yousuf was making out without milk in Gaza. It never crossed my mind, I told him, because Yousuf (don't gag, I know he's nearly two) still breast-feeds, given the ardent breastfeeding advocate I am. I am a human milking station. The benefits of nursing are never as clear to me as when we face Israeli closures which cut us off quite literally from the world, and also from, among other things, infant formula.

Baghdad, February 11

R.

We were collected at my aunt's house for my cousin's birthday party a few days ago. J. just turned 16 and my aunt invited us for a late lunch and some cake. It was a very small gathering: three cousins, including myself, my parents, and J.'s best friend, who also happened to be a neighbor.

The lunch was quite good: my aunt is possibly one of the best cooks in Baghdad. She makes traditional Iraqi food and for J.'s birthday she had prepared all our favorites: dolma (rice and meat wrapped in grape leaves, onions, peppers, etc.), beryani rice, stuffed chicken, and some salads. The cake was ready-made and it was in the shape of a friendly-looking fish, J.'s father having forgotten she was an Aquarius and not

a Pisces when he selected it. “I thought everyone born in February was a Pisces...” he explained when we pointed out his mistake.

When it was time to blow out the candles, the electricity was out and we stood around her in the dark and sang “Happy Birthday” in two different languages. She squeezed her eyes shut briefly to make a wish and then, with a single breath, she blew out the candles. She proceeded to open gifts: bear pajamas, boy band CDs, a sweater with some sparkly things on it, a red and beige book bag... Your typical gifts for a teenager.

The gift that made her happiest, however, was given by her father. After she’d opened up everything, he handed her a small, rather heavy, silvery package. She unwrapped it hastily and gasped with delight: “Baba, it’s lovely!”. She smiled as she held it up to the light of the gas lamp to show it off. It was a Swiss Army knife, complete with corkscrew, nail clippers, and a bottle opener.

“You can carry it around in your bag for protection when you go places!” he explained. She smiled and gingerly pulled out the blade. “And look, when the blade is clean, it works as a mirror!” We all oohed and aahed our admiration and T., another cousin, commented she’d get one when the Swiss Army began making them in pink. I tried to remember what I got on my 16th birthday and I was sure it wasn’t a knife of any sort.

By 8 pm, my parents and J.’s neighbor were gone. They had left me and T., our 24-year-old female cousin, to spend a night. It was 2 am and we had just gotten J.’s little brother into bed. He

had eaten more than his share of cake and the sugar had made him wild for a couple of hours. We were gathered in the living room and my aunt and her husband, Ammoo [uncle] S. were asleep. T., J. and I were speaking softly and looking for songs on the radio, having sworn not to sleep before the cake was all gone. T. was playing idly with her mobile phone, trying to send a message to a friend. "Hey, there's no coverage here... is it just my phone?" she asked. J. and I both took out our phones and checked. "Mine isn't working either..." J. answered, shaking her head. They both turned to me and I told them that I couldn't get a signal either. J. suddenly looked alert and made a sort of "Uh-oh" sound as she remembered something. "R., will you check the telephone next to you?" I picked up the ordinary telephone next to me and held my breath, waiting for a dial tone. Nothing.

"There's no dial tone... but there was one earlier today; I was online..." J. frowned and turned down the radio. "The last time this happened," she said "the area was raided." The room was suddenly silent and we strained our ears. Nothing. I could hear a generator a couple of streets away, and I also heard the distant barking of a dog, but there was nothing out of the ordinary. T. suddenly sat up straight, "Do you hear that?" she asked, wide-eyed. At first I couldn't hear anything and then I caught it: it was the sound of cars or vehicles, moving slowly. "I can hear it!" I called back to T., standing up and moving towards the window. I looked out into the darkness and couldn't see anything beyond the dim glow of lamps behind windows here and there.

“You won’t see anything from here; it’s probably on the main road!” J. jumped up and went to shake her father awake: “Baba, baba, get up. I think the area is being raided”. I heard J. call out as she approached her parents room. Ammoo S. was awake in moments and we heard him wandering around for his slippers and robe asking what time it was.

Meanwhile, the sound of cars had gotten louder and I remembered that one could see some of the neighborhood from a window on the second floor. T. and I crept upstairs quietly. We heard Ammoo S. unlocking five different locks on the kitchen door. “What’s he doing?” T. asked. “Shouldn’t he keep the doors locked?” We were looking out the window and there was the glow of lights a few streets away. I couldn’t see exactly where they came from, as several houses were blocking our view, but we could tell something extraordinary was going on in the neighborhood. The sound of vehicles was getting louder, and it was accompanied by the sound of clanging doors and lights that would flash every once in a while.

We clattered downstairs and found J. and my aunt bustling around in the dark. “What should we do?” T. asked, wringing her hands nervously. The only time I’d ever experienced a raid was back in 2003 at an uncle’s house, and it was Americans. This was the first time I was to witness what we assumed would be an Iraqi raid. My aunt was seething quietly, “This is the third time the bastards raid the area in two months... We’ll never get any peace or quiet...” I stood at their bedroom door and watched as she made

the bed. They lived in a mixed neighborhood: Sunnis, Shi'a and Christians. It was a relatively new neighborhood that began growing in the late eighties. Most of the neighbors have known each other for years. "We don't know what they are looking for... La Ilaha Ila Allah..."

I stood awkwardly, watching them make preparations. J. was already in her room changing; she called out for us to do the same: "They'll come in the house; you don't want to be wearing pajamas...". "Why, will they have camera crews with them?" T. smiled wanly, attempting some humor. "No," J. replied, her voice muffled as she put on a sweater. "Last time they made us wait outside in the cold."

I listened for Ammoo S. and heard him outside, taking the big padlock off of the gate in the driveway. "Why are you unlocking everything J.?" I called out in the dark. "The animals will break down the doors if they aren't open in three seconds and then they'll be all over the garden and house... last time they pushed the door open on poor Abu H. three houses down and broke his shoulder..." J. was fully changed, and over her jeans and sweater she was wearing her robe. It was cold. My aunt had dressed too and she was making her way upstairs to carry down my three-year-old cousin B. "I don't want him waking up with all the noise and finding those bastards around him in the dark."

Twenty minutes later, we were all assembled in the living room. The house was dark except for the warm glow of the kerosene heater and a small lamp in the corner. We were all dressed and waiting nervously, wrapped in blankets. T. and I sat

on the ground while my aunt and her husband sat on the couch, B. wrapped in a blanket between them. J. was sitting in an armchair across from them. It was nearly 4 am.

Meanwhile, the noises outside had gotten louder as the raid got closer. Every once in a while, you could hear voices calling out for people to open a door or the sharp banging of a rifle against a door.

Last time they had raided my aunt's area, they took away four men on their street alone. Two of them were students in their early twenties, one a law student, and the other an engineering student, and the third man was a grandfather in his early sixties. There was no accusation, no problem: they were simply ordered outside, loaded up into a white pickup truck and driven away with a group of other men from the area. Their families haven't heard from them since and they visit the morgue almost daily in anticipation of finding them dead.

"There will be no problem," my aunt said sternly, looking at each of us, thin-lipped. "You will not say anything improper and they will come in, look around and go." Her eyes lingered on Am-moo S. He was silent. He had lit a cigarette and was inhaling deeply. J. said he'd begun smoking again a couple of months ago after having quit for ten years. "Are your papers ready?" she asked him, referring to his identification papers which would be requested. He didn't answer, but nodded his head silently.

We waited. And waited... I began nodding off and my dreams were interspersed with troops and cars and hooded men. I woke to the sound of T.

saying: “They’re almost here...”. And lifted my head, groggy with what I thought was at least three hours of sleep. I squinted down at my watch and noted it was not yet 5 am. “Haven’t they gotten to us yet?” I asked.

Ammoo S. was pacing in the kitchen. I could hear him coming and going in his slippers, pausing every now and then in front of the window. My aunt was still on the couch; she sat with B. in her arms, rocking him gently and murmuring prayers. J. was doing a last-minute check, hiding valuables and gathering our handbags into the living room: “They took baba’s mobile phone during the last raid; make sure your mobile phones are with you”.

I could feel my heart pounding in my ears and I got closer to the kerosene heater in an attempt to dispel the cold that seemed to have permanently taken over my fingers and toes. T. was trembling, wrapped in her blanket. I waved her over to the heater but she shook her head and answered: “I... mmm... n-n-not... c-c-cold...”. It came ten minutes later. A big clanging sound on the garden gate and voices yelling “OPEN UP”. I heard my uncle outside, calling out: “We’re opening the gate, we’re opening...”. It was moments and they were inside the house. Suddenly, the house was filled with strange men, yelling out orders and stomping into rooms. It was chaotic. We could see flashing lights in the garden and lights coming from the hallways. I could hear Ammoo S. talking loudly outside, telling them his wife and the ‘children’ were the only ones in the house. What were they looking for? Was there something wrong? He asked.

Suddenly, two of them were in the living room. We were all sitting on the sofa, near my aunt. My cousin B. was by then awake, eyes wide with fear. They were holding large lights or ‘torches’ and one of them pointed a Kalashnikov at us. “Is there anyone here but you and them?” one of them barked at my aunt. “No, it’s only us and my husband outside with you; you can check the house.” T.’s hands went up to block the glaring light of the torch and one of the men yelled at her to put her hands down, they fell limply in her lap. I squinted in the strong light and as my sight adjusted, I noticed they were wearing masks, only their eyes and mouths showing. I glanced at my cousins and noted that T. was barely breathing. J. was sitting perfectly still, eyes focused on nothing in particular, I vaguely noted that her sweater was on backwards.

One of them stood with the Kalashnikov pointed at us, and the other one began opening cabinets and checking behind doors. We were silent. The only sounds came from my aunt, who was praying in a tremulous whisper and little B., who was sucking away at his thumb, eyes wide with fear. I could hear the rest of the troops walking around the house, opening closets, doors and cabinets. I listened for Ammoo S., hoping to hear him outside but I could only distinguish the harsh voices of the troops. The minutes we sat in the living room seemed to last forever. I didn’t know where to look exactly. My eyes kept wandering to the man with the weapon and yet I knew staring at him wasn’t a good idea. I stared down at a newspaper at my feet and tried to read the upside-down headlines. I glanced at J. again; her heart

was beating so hard, the small silver pendant that my mother had given her just that day was throbbing on her chest in time to her heartbeat. Suddenly, someone called out something from outside and it was over. They began rushing to leave the house, almost as fast as they'd invaded it. Doors slamming, lights dimming. We were left in the dark once more, not daring to move from the sofa we were sitting on, listening as the men disappeared, leaving only a couple to stand at our gate.

"Where's baba?" J. asked, panicking for a moment before we heard his slippers in the driveway. "Did they take him?" Her voice was getting higher. Ammoo S. finally walked into the house, looking weary and drained. I could tell his face was pale even in the relative dark of the house. My aunt sat sobbing quietly in the living room, T. comforting her. "Houses are no longer sacred... We can't sleep... We can't live... If you can't be safe in your own house, where can you be safe? The animals... the bastards..."

We found out a few hours later that one of our neighbors, two houses down, had died. Abu Salih was a man in his seventies and as the Iraqi mercenaries raided his house, he had a heart attack. His grandson couldn't get him to the hospital on time because the troops wouldn't let him leave the house until they'd finished with it. His grandson told us later that day that the Iraqis were checking the houses, but the American troops had the area surrounded and secured. It was a coordinated raid.

They took at least a dozen men from my aunt's area alone, their ages between 19 and 40. The

street behind us doesn't have a single house with a male under the age of 50: lawyers, engineers, students, ordinary laborers, all hauled away by the 'security forces' of the New Iraq. The only thing they share in common is the fact that they come from Sunni families (with the exception of two who I'm not sure about).

We spent the day putting clothes back into closets, taking stock of anything missing (a watch, a brass letter opener, and a walkman), and cleaning dirt and mud off of carpets. My aunt was fanatic about cleansing and disinfecting everything saying it was all "dirty, dirty, dirty...". J. has sworn never to celebrate her birthday again.

It's almost funny: only a month ago, we were watching a commercial on some Arabic satellite channel, Arabiya perhaps. They were showing a commercial for Iraqi security forces and giving a list of numbers Iraqis were supposed to dial in the case of a terrorist attack... You call THIS number if you need the police to protect you from burglars or abductors... You call THAT number if you need the National Guard or special forces to protect you from terrorists... But... Who do you call to protect you from the New Iraq's security forces?

Gaza, February 14

Laila El-Haddad

The shells are falling again. Interspersed with the occasional sonic boom. [...] Yousuf is at a very sensitive stage where he doesn't quite understand what's going on, and looks to me for confirma-

tion of whether or not he should be scared when the shelling starts. Following the advice of a friend, I continue to reassure and distract him.

Today, I tried a new technique. Yousuf loves to sing and dance, so as the shelling started, we listened to some music my friend gave him as a gift: Suheil Khoury's *Bass Shwai*, a children's CD from the Edward Said National Conservatory of Music (ESNCM), where four children, ages 9 to 11, sing songs composed by Khoury using lyrics written by various Palestinian poets and writers. Each song deals with a theme relating to children.

We listened to a song that imagines how the world might be like in different forms; a song I think can be read in many way. Needless to say, it was very therapeutic, perhaps more so for me than him. Sometimes, you need to take a step back and look through the eyes of children. Strange is what you make it, I guess.

“What if the world was made of wood, /birds of wood, /flowers of wood. /What if the world was made of wood, /moons of wood, /stars of wood. / How might it be, I wonder? / How strange... how strange. /How would it be, I wonder? /How strange, how strange... / What if the world was made of paper, /doors of paper, /fences of paper. / What if the world was made of paper, /walls of paper. / How might it be, I wonder? / How strange, how Strange... / What if the world was made of gold, / fish of gold, / sand of gold. / What if the world was made of gold, / snow of gold. / How might we live? / How might we live?

The Praise of Idiocy

Here

notes from the present

If thy whole body therefore be full of light, having no part dark, the whole shall be full of light, as when the bright shining of a candle doth give thee light.

Bruno De Maria

Luke 11:36

Man is born into a prison that stands ready to receive him, a prison that has become more cramped of late. This leads to a restlessness unlike the restlessness of other eras, when life was full of adventure, because it is a restlessness we are forced to endure, one in which we feel confined. It is a restlessness imposed from without, not a liberating impulse that surges from within. The most humiliating experience for a human being is to feel carried along, dragged, as if he were hardly entitled to an opinion, or as if it were almost impossible to choose; unable to make any decisions because other people, who haven't bothered to ask his advice (family, politics, or whatever you care to call them) are already making them for him.

If man wants to survive, he is more or less obliged to reproduce inside himself the laws and desires of the environment around him. But this reproduction does not feel entirely right, and he increasingly shows unease or even acute anxiety; it seems that neither material comforts, nor the marvels of technology, nor the sentimental sops

proffered to him by mass culture can make him happy. It is as if he were nostalgic for something else, something different.

I wouldn't call it 'psyche'—the more or less felicitous result of a connivance with the world. I would call it *soul*, a transcendent aspiration, a divine spark that has been more or less forsaken, whose task—so greatly feared—is the 'demolition of worldly personifications'. Or in other words, something that guides toward the 'symbolic suicide' of everything a tamed or 'cured' 'psyche' has accustomed us to live with.

Rarely is a person or his psychoanalyst able to listen to the half-stifled voice of the soul, since both are likely to have shut themselves off in a time without issue, a dreamy vacuousness, as is the fate of the aimless in a world without beginning or end.

Who will admit that the 'psyche', the result of a compromise between a hereafter we cannot glimpse and a here-and-now to which we are accomplices, does not define the whole person at all, only the atrophied person, who not only cannot imagine peace, but cannot imagine the sacrifices that promise it.

These reflections of mine, muddled as they are, had not been conceptually formulated in any way until a few years ago. I went about my job as a psychoanalyst with a diligent, non-religious approach, often with good results. By 'good results' I meant proper adjustment to life in this world, a remission of symptoms, a moderate sense of well-being. But at the same time, I felt within me a growing discontent, as if in all my work with patients some factor were missing: an unconscious need for *beauty*. It seemed that

at times, my patients and I myself fell victims to a taboo that never gets enough discussion in analytical therapy; a taboo about the need for *beauty* that if manifest, would make the world unbearable, since a reasonably well-tamed psyche needs us anesthetic, anesthetized, psychically dulled.

But what do you call this nostalgia for something capable of overturning the approved order of the world, with its acephalous politics, its wars, the massacres of children, the anguish that grips our hearts, the devastated forests that repay us in poison gas? Can we call this order, this political economy, a Principle of Reality?

If so, then Dostoevsky's 'underground man' would be right to rebel against the current logic, sustaining that "two times two is four is a most obnoxious thing" (*Notes from Underground*, Vintage, 1994; trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky). The collective reasoning of the 'omnitude' is Dostoevsky's nemesis. People think existence outside of it utterly unconceivable. Mankind needs ruts to follow, it needs certainties, and just enough blindness not to see what lies beyond.

But Dostoevsky, like all saints, ceaselessly strains to hear a voice that whispers: "Be daring. Brave the desert and the solitude". And to me, "desert and solitude" seem just the antidote to an existence that has become increasingly frenetic and insane. I ceased to be so sure that the solution lay in 'psychotherapy' alone, at least the kind I was familiar with, since it did not seem capable of turning its back on the world to look for another way leading through "desert and solitude".

It was then that I happened across a letter that

the poet John Keats wrote to his brother and sister-in-law in 1819; to cite a few passages: "...No more can man be happy in spite, the worldly elements will prey upon his nature... The common cognomen of this world among the misguided and superstitious is 'a vale of tears' from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to Heaven. What a little circumscribed straightened notion! Call the world if you please 'The vale of Soul-making' [...] Soul as distinguished from intelligence. There may be intelligences or sparks of the divinity in millions—but they are not Souls until they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself. [...] Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and trouble is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways. [...] There is one [difficulty] which even now strikes me—the salvation of Children. In them the spark or intelligence returns to God without any identity—it having had no time to learn or and be altered by the heart—or seat of the human Passions. [...] And what are circumstances but touchstones of his heart? And what are touchstones but provings of his heart, but fortifiers or alterers of his nature? And what is his altered nature but his Soul?" (letter to George and Georgiana Keats, in *The Letters of John Keats*, Adamant, 2001).

There it is: the thing I felt nostalgic for, which had little to do with analytical technique, was exactly what was suggested to me by John Keats: soul-making. As a non-religious person and a psychotherapist, I could not accept that the territory of the soul was a prerogative of priests,

something granted to us in some hereafter on the basis of our merits or demerits. For me, like Keats, the soul was something to be won on earth, perhaps even a spark of divinity, at times compassionate, at times terrifying as the Avenging Angel who has no mercy for those incapable of imagining another world alongside our own, unbearable one.

When Jesus Christ said that “it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God”, or that the kingdom of heaven is open only to the ‘poor in spirit’, I don’t think he was preaching proletarian discrimination, or showing favour to fools; rather, he was suggesting that only those who do not take worldly possessions seriously, including cold intelligence, can connect with that forsaken and abused thing that is the Soul.

The Soul stands at the sidelines, disheartened by the preeminence given to the psyche and its remedies. As for me, I cannot completely refute what Heraclitus said, that we do not truly know whether life is death or death is life. Of course I am not referring to anything biological, but to something related to the Soul. Are we living or dead with respect to that thing that calls out to us from beyond what we think we are?

As an undauntedly non-religious person, I resisted the mysterious element of religion suggested by the word ‘Soul’. And what’s more, I wasn’t the only one. As contemporary life has become increasingly frenetic, petty, and senseless, the Soul—which demands peace, serenity, and detachment, which is nourished by reflection, silence, and beauty—has been left behind.

And dwelling on the consequences of this loss, Jung (who often dealt with the concept of Soul-Anima, though with some degree of theoretic confusion, in my opinion) writes: “After the middle of life [...] permanent loss of the anima means a diminution of vitality, of flexibility, and of human kindness. The result, as a rule, is premature rigidity, crustiness, stereotypy, fanatical one-sidedness, obstinacy, pedantry, or else resignation, weariness, sloppiness, irresponsibility, and finally a childish *rammollissement*, with a tendency to alcohol”. (“Concerning the Archetypes and the Anima Concept”, *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, Princeton University Press, 1953-1979; trans. R.F.C. Hull.)

On this diagnosis—anything but gentle—I can concur. Psychoanalysts like me have offices full of people who are Soulless, though they often pass for ‘clinically cured cases’. Yet one of Jung’s phrases demands closer examination. I am referring to what he calls “childish *rammollissement*” [soft-headedness]. In the psychiatric sense, this is of course a well-known disorder. But why mix up infantilism and dementia? If anyone is closest to having a soul, it is precisely the *infans*, which etymologically means ‘without speech’, the child. Children have not yet learned the language of adults, with all the conditioning that comes with it, and that is why they laugh.

“Laughter”, writes Dostoyevsky, “is the most reliable gauge of human nature. Look at children, for instance: children are the only human creatures to produce perfect laughter and that’s just what makes them so enchanting [...]. Real laughter must be free of malice. [...] Sincere laughter free of malice denotes gaiety. [...] And

so, if you wish to glimpse inside a human soul and get to know a man, don't bother analyzing his ways of being silent, of talking, of weeping, or seeing how much he is moved by noble ideas; you'll get better results if you just watch him laugh. If he laughs well, he's a good man." (*The Adolescent*, trans. Andrew McAndrew, Norton, 2003.)

But Dostoyevsky's world is inhabited by another character who has succeeded in preserving his innocence: Prince Myshkin, 'the Idiot'. In a letter to Sofia Aleksandrova Ivanova on January 13, 1868, Dostoevsky announces that he has begun work on a new novel. "The main idea of the novel", he writes, "is to portray a positively beautiful man. There is nothing more difficult in the world, and especially now" (cited in introduction to *The Idiot*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Vintage, 2003).

In the author's intentions, his protagonist, Prince Myshkin, is undoubtedly an incarnation of the Christ of the Gospels. To Dostoevsky, Christ is inimitable, because he is a challenge and a paradox, a promise and a hope, a thorn in the flesh and a salve on the wound. But why is this literary incarnation of Christ an 'idiot'? Not because he suffers from epilepsy, of course, but because he arrives from another world and does not understand the laws, the language, and the ugliness of this one. The Idiot is so inspiring because he arrives from another universe, light years away from ours, and has come in contact with our world only to overturn all its customary convictions and conventions. To Myshkin, what we call reality is incomprehensible, and he cannot fathom why people attribute it so much importance, why

they believe in it. Myshkin is the 'stranger' whose purpose is to estrange us from the world, since his meek otherness 'defamiliarizes' established reality, making it seem bizarre and forcing us to look at it through fresh eyes. He is the bearer of a counterculture that travels through the structure of the world as it is, but is too diaphanous and open-ended to take on solid form and keep from foundering, in the end, along with all the other strangers in the novel. Like Christ, he is killed, albeit symbolically. And so the divine light whose message he bears is swallowed up by the vast, voracious Shadow of which the world's fabric is woven.

Perhaps we are not 'idiots' enough to change it.

Baghdad, February 23

R.

There was an explosion this morning in a mosque in Samarra, a largely Sunni town. While the mosque is sacred to both Sunnis and Shi'a, it is considered one of the most important Shi'a visiting places in Iraq. Samarra is considered a sacred city by many Muslims and historians because it was made the capital of the Abassid Empire, after Baghdad, by the Abassid Caliph Al-Mu'tasim.

The name 'Samarra' is actually derived from the phrase in Arabic *Sarre men ra'a* which translates to 'A joy for all who see'. This is what the city was named by Al-Mu'tasim when he laid the plans for a city that was to compete with the greatest cities of the time: it was to be a joy for all who saw it. It remained the capital of the Abassid Empire for nearly sixty years and even after

The day after the terrorist attack to Samarra Mosque, a 'Sunnite hunt' is triggered all over Iraq: dozens mosques are set on fire; 130 people die.

the capital was Baghdad once again, Samarra flourished under the care of various Caliphs.

The mosque damaged with explosives today is the Askari Mosque, which is important because it is believed to be the burial place of two of the 12 Shi'a Imams: Ali Al-Hadi and Hassan Al-Askari (father and son) who lived and died in Samarra. The site of the mosque is believed to be where Ali Al-Hadi and Hassan Al-Askari lived and were buried. Many Shi'a believe Al-Mahdi 'al muntadhar' [the Expected One] will also be resurrected or will reappear from this mosque.

I remember visiting the mosque several years ago, before the war. We visited Samarra to have a look at the famous 'Malwiya' tower and someone suggested we also visit the Askari mosque. I was reluctant as I wasn't dressed properly at the time: jeans and a t-shirt are not considered mosque garb. We stopped by a small shop in the city and purchased a few inexpensive black *abbayas* for us women and drove to the mosque.

We got there just as the sun was setting and I remember pausing outside the mosque to admire the golden dome and the intricate minarets. It was shimmering in the sunset and there seemed to be a million colors—orange, gold, white—it was almost glowing. The view was incredible and the environment was so peaceful and calm. There was none of the bustle and noise usually surrounding religious sites; we had come at a perfect time. The inside of the mosque didn't disappoint either: elaborate Arabic script and more gold and this feeling of utter peace... I'm grateful we decided to visit it.

We woke up this morning to news that men wearing Iraqi security uniforms walked in and deto-

nated explosives, damaging the mosque almost beyond repair. It's heart-breaking and terrifying. There has been gunfire all over Baghdad since morning. The streets near our neighborhood were eerily empty and calm but there was a tension that had us all sitting on edge. We heard about problems in areas like Baladiyat where there was some rioting and vandalism, etc. and several mosques in Baghdad were attacked. I think what has everyone most disturbed is the fact that the reaction was so swift, like it was just waiting to happen.

All morning we've been hearing/watching both Shi'a and Sunni religious figures speak out against the explosions and emphasise that this is what is wanted by the enemies of Iraq, this is what they would like to achieve: divide and conquer. Extreme Shi'a are blaming extreme Sunnis and Iraq seems to be falling apart at the seams under foreign occupiers and local fanatics.

No one went to work today as the streets were mostly closed. The situation isn't good at all. I don't think I remember things being this tense; everyone is just watching and waiting quietly. There's so much talk of civil war and yet, with the people I know—Sunnis and Shi'a alike—I can hardly believe it is a possibility. Educated, sophisticated Iraqis are horrified with the idea of turning against each other, and even not-so-educated Iraqis seem very aware that this is a small part of a bigger, more ominous plan...

Several mosques have been taken over by the Mahdi militia [military forces that side with Moqtada al-Sadr and Ja'affari] and the Badr people seem to be everywhere. Tomorrow no one is going to work or college or anywhere. People are scared and watchful. We can only pray.

The last few days have been unsettlingly violent in spite of the curfew. We've been at home simply waiting it out and hoping for the best. The phone wasn't working and the electrical situation hasn't improved. We are at a point, however, where things like electricity, telephones and fuel seem like minor worries. Even complaining about them is a luxury Iraqis can't afford these days. The sounds of shooting and explosions usually begin at dawn, at least that's when I first sense them, and they don't really subside until well into the night. There was a small gunfight on the main road near our area the day before yesterday, but with the exception of the local mosque being fired upon, and a corpse found at dawn three streets down, things have been relatively quiet.

Some of the neighbors have been discussing the possibility of the men setting up a neighborhood watch. We did this during the war and during the chaos immediately after the war. The problem this time is that the Iraqi security forces are as much to fear as the black-clad and hooded men attacking mosques, houses and each other.

It does not feel like civil war because Sunnis and Shi'a have been showing solidarity these last few days in a big way. I don't mean the clerics or the religious zealots or the politicians, but the average person. Our neighborhood is mixed and Sunnis and Shi'a alike have been outraged with the attacks on mosques and shrines. The telephones have been down, but we've agreed upon a very primitive communication arrangement. Should any house in the area come under siege, some-

one would fire in the air three times. If firing in the air isn't an option, then someone inside the house would have to try to communicate trouble from the rooftop.

The mosques also have a code when they're in trouble, i.e. under attack: the man who does the call for prayer calls out "Allahu Akbar" three times until people from the area can come help protect the mosque or someone gets involved.

Yesterday they were showing Sunni and Shi'a clerics praying together in a mosque and while it looked encouraging, I couldn't help but feel angry. Why don't they simply tell their militias to step down, to stop attacking mosques and *husseiniyas* [Shiite worship and meeting places], to stop terrorizing people? It's so deceptive and empty on television: like a peaceful vision from another land. The Iraqi government is pretending dismay, but it's doing nothing to curb the violence and the bloodshed beyond a curfew. And where are the Americans in all of this? They are sitting back and letting things happen—sometimes flying a helicopter here or there—but generally not getting involved.

I'm reading, and hearing, about the possibility of civil war. The possibility. Yet I'm sitting here wondering if this is actually what civil war is like. Has it become a reality? Will we look back at this in one year, two years... ten... and say: "It began in February 2006..."? It is like a nightmare in that you don't realise it's a nightmare while having it; only later, after waking up with your heart throbbing, and your eyes searching the dark for a pinpoint of light, do you realise it was a nightmare...

One Night (or a Thousand)

by Roberto Giannoni

Here

notes from the present

“...in Scheherazade I saw the symbol of Eastern, and especially Semitic, narrativity. And in the various Gulf wars I saw the fight between that narrativity and Poole and Popper’s logic: even before the fight for oil and the fight to conform Arab world uses and consumption to American ones. It is to let Frege, the Vienna Circle and Voltaire prevail that the Western world is making a desert of the rest of the world (all images, though, have to be non-traumatic, and everything has to appear as being entrusted to the action of smart bombs: hence the static vision of a uniform greenish sky: ...the sky is green).

...wa-yòmer Avrahâm ...fa-qâlat hia (“Abraham said... She recounted ...”). These are opening words, the former typical of biblical narrations, and of Arabic fables the latter. For all ancient peoples story-telling is the only talisman which the unarmed hero is entitled to use, though this is true all the more so for Semitic populations, especially in Mosaic tradition, which Jews and Arabs have in common and which is marked by radical contraposition between language and image, where the former undisputedly prevails. In the sphere of such dominance perhaps we should further distinguish between fari and ði-cere, to use terms from our own tradition, and

*and go as far as to reformulate § 7 of Wittgenstein's Tractatus: "What we cannot speak of, we can however tell as a tale". On the contrary, we experience that our absolute faith in *dicere*, intrinsic to the world of 'the enlightened', and therefore to our Western pride, permits no other alternative to remaining silent, and commanding silence by any means: quod silentium faciunt, pacem appellant."*

To the girls from Baghdad

Recount some more, tell us what's next, don't stop,
even though bombs are falling and the sky is green.
Speak: because otherwise we will lose
the thread of the whole story...

You know

that your breath is like a loom on which
you weave together voices, while
outside it's dark: an immense night,
with a world that seems empty and is there for you.
Keep going like that, till the dreams
have burnt themselves out, like a candle.
Then stop talking... Save it for this evening,
if there is another evening down here.
If there are still some crumbs of things left for us
to say to the living...

Seems the air's burning

in the middle of this racket, with those signal lights
that come down to locate us and make us die.
Not even one star. Only a few words:
...*wa-yòmer Avrahâm...fa-qâlat hia*
Line them up again—edgeways—
like bricks you make with your breath.
Or like a length of thread, long enough

to reach to the sky, to be tied
to a tomorrow—fingers and hand
immediately seeing to a nice tight knot...

Here
we have no shade.

A light comes down,
more and more light, because they've got to see the bridges...
Unravel this tale: if you keep recounting
Maybe we too will (re)count something.

(1991-2004)

Gaza, February 27

Laila El-Haddad

6:14 pm. The shelling has been going on for some time, then it suddenly occurred to me to begin to keep track, for no particular reason other than to actualize these episodes for myself. 6:18 pm. 13 shells. I lost count after that. But what I did remember about this particular bout was that Yousuf, for the first time, told me that he's "afraid". Usually he'll just say "yamma" in a rather animated way that children do (it means "oh mommy!"). But today, he associated fear with the earth-pounding noise—which he thought was coming from the kitchen because that's where he was when he heard it ("khayif... hinak!", "afraid... over there!"). You can't explain such an incomprehensible existence to a two year old. You just try and normalize his reality. That's why I love the film *Life is Beautiful* so much.

He'll only get as scared as you do, sometimes. And sometimes no amount of reassurance can convince him that this loud and recurrent thud he hears every day is innocuous (so far). One Israeli

friend who emailed to check on us even suggested I make a counting game out of it: how many shells can we count today? (not a suggestion I'm likely to adopt anytime soon). I sometimes think of Rafah's children, and how their lives must have been during those nights under constant Israeli siege; how their lives will continue now; whether they can continue with any certainty at all. Being a mother puts a whole new spin on it.

Gaza, March 6

Laila El-Haddad

I'm tired. And mad, at how unproductive being tired can make me, among other things. But mainly, I'm just tired. Sometimes it can get exhausting being here. It's not so much one single event, but rather the sum total of a series of everyday seemingly insignificant incidents that make up the occupation in all its ugliness and brutality and take their insidious toll on you, that creep up on you while you may think yourself not susceptible somehow, sometimes. A border closure here. A milk or diaper shortage there. A travel ban. An aerial assault. Anger and depression and despondence. All of this, combined with the daily realization that your life is not yours to live. The air is not yours to breathe. It's suffocating and psychologically taxing.

And working in the news, covering the news that's all around you, makes it even harder. It can be all too easy to lose perspective. It also makes you realize how easy it is to become the news yourself.

I slept most of the afternoon. And was dizzy most

of the morning. And when I woke up I learned that the explosion I heard was an attack by an unmanned Israeli drone in the teeming, poverty-stricken Shijaeeya neighborhood not far from my house. It killed the intended ‘targets’: two members of Islamic Jihad. But it also killed three others. Including two children-brothers, 8-year-old Raed Al-Batch and his 15-year-old brother Ala. They were with their mother at the time. She lived, only to learn that she lost two boys. At once.
I’m just so tired.

Jerusalem, March 15

Marc Ellis

Arrival in Israel, the weather nice, somewhat cool, the sun high—Jerusalem.

The airport is different, quite different from the one I have been coming to since 1973. Before the plane stopped and people disembarked on the runway, then to buses, and all arrivals to one area for passport control. Now disembarking, as in other major airports, is through a jetway and into a large, quite nice, airport. It had to happen in the last two years, the last time I was in Israel.

The ride to Jerusalem is also becoming more modern. A highway system has been built, and now also a rapid train to Jerusalem is being built. Less visible are the burned-out vehicles, tanks and jeeps, from the 1948 war that have been left on the sides of the road as a reminder of the war. Tonight we had dinner with Zvi and Ronni, Zvi the one who teaches at Sapir College in the Negev and who invited me to give the keynote at the conference he is running there next week on the

need for an alternative politics in Israel. I have been quite excited about the invitation. [...]

The hotel is Israeli, far from everything and my son Aaron and I have noticed already that the workers are Palestinians. The hotel is filled with pilgrims—today from Singapore—who have come on a Holy Land tour. They don't know that the workers are Palestinian; the Palestinians are only allowed to speak Hebrew—evidently by custom and law. Would the tourists be scared if they heard Arabic?

Israel has always fascinated me. Lively to put it mildly, brash and loud, and sometimes sweet. The Jerusalem stone is beautiful, and when all is quiet in the early morning there is a sense of peace and tranquility here that is somewhat different than other places I have been. Of course, the afternoon can be quite different, with a searing heat and clash of cultures that spins violence sometimes out of control. Odd, too, how each time I come to Israel the situation is somewhat different in terms of the politics, different phases of the endless peace process; either peace is right around the corner or Armageddon—or both at the same time.

Already talk of unrest that might seal Bethlehem off for travelers. My first talk is scheduled at the university there, and in the next day or so I will find out if the lecture will take place. A Christian university, Palestinians and a quite active student body. Mostly Fatah-PLO supporters—and the tension with the recent election victory of Hamas is high. Also the wall being built around Bethlehem is squeezing the economy and travel opportunities. The wall there is new—I have only read about it and soon will see it for the first

time. Also a new checkpoint terminal is evidently in place, modernized and permanent, that is again regulating Palestinian movement into and out of the city. Jerusalem, right next door, is off-limits to Palestinians now without a permit. Hardship and humiliation. [...]

Aaron and I are meeting up with Rabbi Jeremy Milgrom tomorrow. Just saw him in Waco at my Center. I have known him for years, and once I asked him why he takes his beautiful multi-colored kippah off when he visits the West Bank and the Palestinians. I asked him if he did this out of fear of being identified as a Jew or out of shame of what Jews are doing to Palestinians. He replied that both reasons applied. Today Jeremy refuses to serve in the army and I believe he is getting ready to leave Israel for good. The dream of Israel that he embraced in his teenage years—moving from California to Israel in 1968—has turned into a nightmare.

Years ago Jeremy came 'home' to Israel; now he joins the hundreds of thousands Israelis who live in exile abroad. Leaving and now rejoining the Diaspora. The great reversal.

I come to Israel to experience again what is going on and the land itself, always trying to figure out my relationship to this entire experiment, Israel as a nation-state but also Israel as a people. And Israelis themselves. How do I relate to them, this new breed of Jews? Or supposed new breed. Actually I relate quite easily and enjoy aspects of their bravado and clarity—not their racism toward the Arabs, so evident in daily and political life, but the sense that all is on the line and stands on issues, even when you disagree, is welcomed.

So different from American Jews, especially on the local scene. In fact I always think when I arrive in Israel that the reason why I might come to live here one day is to escape American Jews! Not all, but many: I prefer real violence to the violence of innuendo, half-truths and character assassination—to a pseudo-violence that uses Israel and Israelis as cannon fodder and for our own reasons of establishing our manhood. I wonder if this macho-Jewishness is simply an attempt to establish beyond doubt something that we doubt at a deep level—the unresolved question of who we are as Jews.

Questions of identity, raised everywhere and especially here. Can one be Jewish in the Diaspora, fully Jewish? Can one be Jewish in Israel, or does the Israeli identity take over from Jewishness? The very special secret is that many Jewish Israelis don't think of themselves as Jewish at all; they are Israeli and want to leave the past, even their dependency on Jews in the Diaspora, especially American Jews, behind. [...]

Gaza, March 15

Laila El-Haddad

Suddenly, seemingly out of no where, Jericho, the oldest city in the world, and the Marxist-Leninist PFLP [Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine], one of the oldest Palestinian national organizations, are dramatically thrust onto the world stage (in the PFLP's case, after a long absence and being overshadowed by Hamas). With tanks and bulldozers and helicopter gunships, Israeli military forces besieged the Palestinian prison in the otherwise sleepy desert

town, [...] ultimately seizing six of the most wanted inmates holed up inside. Most prominent among them, Ahmed Saadat, held in the Jericho prison in a deal that involved American and British observers, without ever standing trial. He was accused of overseeing the assassination of Israeli Tourism Minister, and self-declared ethnic cleanser who referred to Palestinians as “lice” and “cancer”, Rehavam Ze’evi, in retaliation for Israel’s extra-judicial assassination of its leader Abu Ali Mustafa (Mustafa al-Zibri) in August 2001. Interestingly, Ze’evi was founder of the Moledet Party, an extremist, ultra-nationalist party that openly called for the transfer of all Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza, and for the annexation of Jordan, even after its 1994 peace deal with Israel. [...] The tireless [Israeli peace activist] Uri Avneri attacked the siege as a pre-election ploy by Olmert, saying the 2001 Ze’evi assassination was no different than an Israeli-style ‘targeted killing’. [...]

Angry protestors from the PFLP poured out onto Gaza’s streets. They attacked symbols of what they perceived as foreign collusion: the British Council (a cultural center) was partially burned, and the office of Amideast [America-Mideast Educational and Training Services], which is in the building right next door to me, was briefly stormed, and its windows shattered. They called a general strike as stores closed their doors. Machine-gun fire ripped through the air as Israeli drones whirred incessantly above, and Israeli artillery shells continued to pound Eastern and Northern Gaza, shaking my entire building. Plumes of black smoke from burnt tires and vehicles could be seen rising in Gaza’s skies. [...]

Slept well, considering the change in time zones. The early light in Jerusalem, soft, soothing. Aaron also up. Our morning prayer together, he speaking, me listening. Solemn, open. Dwelling in the prayer. Is it different here than there? Different in Jerusalem than Waco? [...]

Already in the Old City; the smells familiar. Compared to 1973, clean, almost antiseptic, though, in reality, still dirty. The city has changed in demography. Then completely Arab Palestinian; now the Jewish presence is significant. The Jewish presence is the future.

At the Western Wall; almost surreal. Back in time and forward at the same time. Orthodox Jews in all sorts of outfits—including one with a Yankees batting shirt over his black jacket! Men to one side, women to the other. Gathered in small groups at the Wall praying, then back some, again in small groups, with their own Torahs. Standing and seated—on plastic chairs you buy at Home Depot. Strange mixture: the power to conquer the city and hold it; the prayers of the faithful protected by the ever-present military; affluence and simplicity side by side. Humility, really, but false? Like the simple life of the monk that costs a fortune? Or the monasteries of old that operated as fortified settlements?

Contradiction everywhere in the world, but nowhere more than here. The holy city of prayer periodically filled with blood. Knee-deep in the Dome of the Rock according to eye-witness accounts. Reports not from the enemy, but from the victor, bragging about subduing the infidel. The

cry of triumph standing knee-deep in blood!!!
Religion and atrocity—big business in Jerusalem and the surrounding environs. But how much of it all is religious? The use of religion? Difficult to separate anywhere, and again here almost impossible. Better to see religion as a thread within all the other political and cultural realities. Don't think of faith as is done in the West and modernity. Think of religion as part of the larger picture. Don't ask what people believed or believe today, think of a seamless garment where everything fits together, and one thread means nothing without the other. Think also of symbols, mostly religious, but, again, not in the strictly religious sensibility. The Dome of the Rock is crucial with or without faith, so too the Western Wall and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Touch them in the wrong way and the entire region explodes, or at least, statements from religious bodies scream across time zones with emphatic pronouncements. Extraordinary life, these religious symbols and Jerusalem as such. Ordinary life for the inhabitants of the city—more difficult.

I have often wondered what ordinary life would look like here and in Israel in general. Things have been pumped up—founding a nation, a response to the Holocaust, pioneering in difficult geography, hostile Arab nations—the whole routine repeated ad nauseam. Not untrue; not completely true. By this time, like religion, enshrined in myth and difficult to untangle. The fear being that untangling any thread unravels it all.

Is it good to untangle what seemingly can't be? Or is it better to move forward with the entanglements, trying to place them into another motion, a different orbit, as it were?

Revolutionary forgiveness—I have often thought of this with regard to entanglement. Not moving backwards or even assigning blame but agreeing on the movement toward justice and then letting the entanglements find their own way, unravel or come together in a different pattern. Like any tradition or memory, becoming different in light of the present. If there is movement forward. Otherwise the entanglements become worse, more tightly woven, violent.

We move with ourselves, with our history, whole and in fragments, the constellations of our identity always moving, but hardly noticed. Steps forward place our identity in a movement that becomes more noticeable, elements of our life and history, once buried, come to articulation. Where before we feel only hurt and violation, now a sense of world beyond violence comes into being. Instead of defensiveness without thought, generosity comes to the fore. It is like coming out of a depression that seems to have no end. Suddenly there is new life.

New life with justice, but not only. Justice with compassion, sorrow and hope; sunset and dawn together. The in between is the struggle, the Sisyphian moment before the task is begun or done—the hard work of justice in the broad light of day. Only justice can bring forgiveness, and even then, only after the long haul. For most, only a glimpse of that final moment.

So it is the first day. Tired from walking and touring. The Old City has charm, but after awhile a clean room beckons. Tomorrow to the settlements and checkpoints and the other Wall. No prayers there, or another type of prayer. [...]

The Other Wall at Ramallah and the checkpoint too—as Shabbat comes. Aaron and I spent part of our day with Machsonwatch—a checkpoint watch by Israeli women who have for years been monitoring what happens to Palestinians as they cross in and out Israel. Many horrific stories including Palestinian women who give birth at the checkpoint because they are delayed in crossing, because the checkpoint is closed or simply because they are in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Airport/checkpoint—a comparison, the modernization and regularization of both. In the beginning both were fairly primitive and behind the technological times as it were; now both are highly developed and modernized. For years I would pass checkpoints, improvised and movable, usually a jeep with a couple of army personnel checking passports and identification cards. Now the terminals are permanent; you hardly see any soldiers—it’s all done behind closed glass and through speaker phones. Not only do you hardly see anyone, the distance produces confusion in language and procedure. Aaron and I are simply guessing where to go, following crowds of Palestinians who themselves are uncertain when they will be let through or if they will. The reasons are never given.

A checkpoint economy has sprung up with taxis and buses for Palestinians on either side of the checkpoint. Food is sold, and clothes too. At the checkpoint, soldiers and privatized security guards; also, the Wall being built and rebuilt as the checkpoint terminal is enlarged and modernized.

The Israeli women, including Roni, go through the checkpoint into Ramallah and mingle with the Palestinians, observe the process, report on violations of procedure, Israeli and international law, jot down complaints by Palestinians; they also try to talk to Israeli guards and security, but now it's more difficult. They too are barred from the personal; nobody is within talking distance.

The women are quite depressed and persistent. Their attitude is that Israel is their society and that the checkpoints are operated in their name. Horrible for them, a violation of the Zionist dream. Akin to other previous measures against Jews; obvious comparisons that they do not hesitate to bring forth.

I immediately thought of a book from long ago—*Regulating the Poor*—that portrays government programs in America as attempting to keep a minority of Americans poor and out of sight by regulating their behavior and public presence. Standing at the checkpoint I understood this not primarily as a security measure but as a way of regulating the Palestinians so that they would become a subject people. No room to maneuver or develop, making their days miserable and their time spent on surviving. How can one resist when walls and checkpoints monitor/enclose your entire life?

The ever-present sniper tower right above as we spoke with Palestinian taxi drivers.

Regulated and unregulated. At the checkpoint, order to the nth degree. On the Palestinian side. Outside the checkpoint: chaos, almost a wilderness of crowded roads, mostly unpaved, and masses of people hoping to get out of the area as fast as they can. The checkpoint seems civilized in comparison.

Reversal of civilized, at least the meaning of the word. Again, echoes from the past.

In Ramallah, Aaron searches for the headquarters of ISM—International Solidarity Movement—and after several taxi rides and many (mis)directions we find the headquarters. Sparse, all volunteer, with people from around the world coming to help the Palestinians in their latest struggle against the Wall. A young woman from Switzerland and a guy from Washington State inspired by the work and death of Rachel Corrie. Aaron holds forth with a Palestinian who heads up this section of the movement; he began to work against the Wall when his tiny village was divided—farm and grazing land from his home—by the Wall. He also has applied to universities in America to pursue his dream of a college education. Bizarre, but wholly within this crazy geography of the Holy Land; the fight against the Wall is a struggle of life against death. America is also beckoning. The Palestinian moves between these two subjects without apparent contradiction.

The tension is palpable. A few days ago the Israelis invaded Jericho, and a prison there that held several Palestinians who had a few years earlier assassinated an Israeli cabinet official. American and British forces guarded this jail, were told to leave by the Israelis, and then the invasion and kidnapping of the prisoners took place. The prisoners were quickly brought back to Israel and placed in jail again. Some think this is an election move by the government, bolstering its security credentials, etc.—the elections being only a couple of weeks away. In response, some kidnappings in Gaza and rumors of other

kidnappings in the West Bank—of a couple of Americans and British. Zvi fears for my safety—doesn't want to lose his keynote speaker! Talking to the Palestinians at the checkpoint, they ask if we aren't afraid. Now at ISM the matter is brought up again. How can Palestinians feel respected if Walls, checkpoints, invasions are conducted regularly, randomly and without resistance?

Not everything is about dignity and honor but without it what do we have as persons and also as a people? Regular humiliation, daily—where can it lead? Power thinks peace is found through security and more power. The oppressed wait for their moment, a moment that empire thinks will never come.

A checkpoint for Jews? Not needed, not possible because we are innocent, on top and in control. Still, imagine the outcry by Jews if just one Jew in the world had to go through a checkpoint, a regular daily occurrence for Palestinians? How about a Wall built around us? The outcry would be immediate. Rightly so.

Are Palestinians less?

Friday night dinner—an invitation from Zvi and Roni. Not Shabbat, they are completely secular, but still they gather as a family on Friday night. And good discussion with Aaron being taken off to a club by Anat and Noah, their two grown children. Anat is especially quite vocal about the occupation and teaching at Hebrew University in the program filled with Jewish kids from the US. Teaches Hebrew—and loves it—but teaching them. Mostly spoiled and partying, education is the least on the list of the young Jewish Americans. Complicated story about the

love of Hebrew and not wanting to teach it as an empire language or as a tool for empire.

Why the love of Hebrew and guarding it as a special language? Anat doesn't quite get the question but also does get it. No way of answering for her, although clearly disturbed by her teaching of a language she loves to people who are not interested about the politics of the nation.

Late into the night a long discussion with Zvi about Jewishness, a term he doesn't apply to himself. He is an Israeli and an internationalist. In such a Jewish way.

Gaza, March 18

Laila El-Haddad

Walking around Gaza today, one would have thought there was a war looming (well, I guess we are in a perpetual state of low-intensity war, but still). Most bakeries throughout the city were closed by mid-afternoon, with the only remaining ones jam-packed with customers, lines extending out to the streets till late at night. The reason: flour stocks have officially run out in Gaza due to a 44-day and going-strong Israeli-imposed closure of the only commercial crossing for goods and humanitarian supplies. Palestinians in Gaza consume around 350 tons of flour per day, but all flour mills have shut down due to the depletion of wheat stocks, and bakeries are working through their last bags of stored flour. As word of the shortage spread, residents flocked to bakeries, in many cases bringing their own bags of flour with them.

In one bakery I went to, the scene was one of

panic and fear, with Israeli war jets roaring overhead and men lining up for hours, children taking their place sometimes. At one point, two men's nerves snapped and a fight nearly broke out on whose turn it was. A group of armed men immediately came in to break it up (interestingly, a cigarette-smoking police officer walked casually on by, despite my pleas to get him to intervene). Bags of bread were rationed—two per family—to make sure there was enough for all, as the final truckload of stored flour was delivered to the bakery. [...]

Jerusalem, March 19

Marc Ellis

No kidding—the discussion about Jewishness is real in Israel. The Orthodox claim it big time and the seculars distance themselves from it—also big time. You are either Orthodox or not religious, really, in the main, anti-religious. Little or nothing in between.

Of course Israel was founded by Jews who wanted to live in a non-Jewish state populated by Jews. That is a state where Jews could be who they are without being singled out, having to justify themselves, or being defined by others. Years have passed, and the entire field of religion has changed; so has the population of Israel changed, geographically and generationally. Jews who came to Palestine were raised in overtly Jewish atmospheres; often their very identity as a Zionist was a turning away from traditional Judaism. The children of the parents who rebelled are not rebelling against something they find completely irrelevant, so even the non-Jewish Jew

has less content to his rebellion against Jewishness. Again the definition is Israeli. But what content can that definition have? How will that mobilize ordinary Israelis to sacrifice for their state?

This is why privatization of security is so interesting; it is the army that has bound Israelis together at the deepest level, the shared sense that a defeat would mean annihilation.

I remember my journey to Israel in 1973, the very time that the October war broke out. Peace and stability within Israel during that time, a kind of strange sense that all would be ok. On the other hand, also a shared sense that if Israel lost, all would be killed. A shared reality. The end would come.

True, I thought then, and still do. Does that mean that injustice can be justified? A cycle ensues that I see each time I travel to Israel; fear on the Israeli side so that only strength can be shown; a need to keep the Palestinians in their sights, underneath their power, which only breeds more resentment and a desire for revenge. If the situation were reversed this would be true for Jews as well. Anyone really. [...]

Today in Bethlehem, again the Wall and the checkpoint. And inside Bethlehem, Rachel's Tomb, now a fortress to protect Jews who come to pray there. The guardians of the Tomb, do they also guard God?

Guarding the Biblical heritage and not only the Jewish part. Increasingly, the holy sites for Christians are controlled by Jews; pilgrimage-tourism fully benefiting the Jewish state. Christians would have it no other way. Could you imagine going to a Christian holy site and having Pales-

tinians there? For most an impossibility. Even the Palestinian Christians are considered Muslims. Arab Christians—impossible.

Our hotel is filled with these pilgrims who are quite happy with everything as it is—minus the jet-lag. Truth be told, they spend most of their time speaking about people and events back home. Pilgrimage without sacrifice and without hospitality, except that which they have paid for. Air conditioned buses and good prices, some trinkets for home, and the Biblical verses read at certain places where Jesus lived or died or was buried or rose again. Usually more than one place where all of this happened or as they say—“according to tradition”.

The tourist/pilgrims aren't interested in this complexity. Still, I shouldn't be so harsh. Many of the people in the hotel are of very modest means and their trip here could indeed be a sacrifice. Also the trip of their lifetime. I judge, but really, should I?

Judging is so much a part of life, mine included, and it is difficult not to make many judgments here. More difficult if I lived here no doubt, and therefore a moment of silence before the women of Machsonwatch, all those Israelis—I almost said Jews!—who oppose the policies of denigrating another people. [...]

Jerusalem, March 21

Marc Ellis

So much is happening that there isn't time in the evening to jot it all down. Israel is fast paced and so is Palestine. It is hard to remember parts of the day with the rush of events, the check-

points, the Wall and the ever fascinating Jews and Palestinians. It's like this war brings out the best and the worst of everyone involved—at the same time.

Last night dinner with a Palestinian architect of the Geneva Accords, a planned compromise of the conflict that hit the news several years ago. The accords were widely discussed, even mentioned by then Secretary Powell, heralded as a breakthrough and also thrashed by the aspects of the political left on both sides. A valiant effort to make something out of a disaster; then the various Israeli invasions of Palestinian territory, the US invasion of Iraq—the list goes on.

The list has always gone on and on, hopeful signs, even breakthroughs, followed by manufactured or random events that plow over the hope. Until it is impossible to know if the events are planned or whether a vast and intelligent conspiracy operates on behalf of Israel. Or whether the fate of Palestine has already been decided by the fates impervious to human ingenuity.

I have often thought that the Palestinians are simply on the wrong side of history; no matter what they have done and do it is simply insufficient to stem that tide. The weakness of the Arab world, the strength of the West, the Holocaust and its narrative—all of this means defeat for the Palestinians. Israel has taken advantage of this situation, and why not? What national entity wouldn't take the land and expand its borders when it is there for the taking? Especially as the nation is forming. Take what it can while it can. Of course the Palestinian recourse has always been that Israel cannot hold onto this land for-

ever, it will self-destruct, be overwhelmed, will lose the support of America and Europe—on and on. Rescue strategies, none of which have arrived or will arrive. The rescue that never comes.

Our dinner companion has those same strategies; in a few years the world will come around to the Geneva Accords. A five-year window of opportunity and then, according to him, it will be too late. But how many times have I heard this story, the window of opportunity that no one can afford to have closed, that nevertheless closes. The next window has less and less land for Palestinians—a recurring theme. For how many years has this been happening? Certainly since 1984 when I first wrote on a Jewish theology of liberation, and before that as well. How long before we essentially say that there was never a real window, that the window of opportunity has been an illusion? Palestinians have no choice but to pursue that illusion. Without power or powerful allies they have no choice but to hold on for the ride and hope for something unexpected to happen that might actually make a reality out of an illusion. [...]

Yesterday also a discussion with a Palestinian in Bethlehem who had been imprisoned in Israeli jails for seventeen years. He now runs an ecumenical center but he also said that he might not be far from the gun—again. Also expressing a hope that the Palestinian Authority might collapse, therefore ending the collaboration with Israel and the false hope that the PA represents. He prefers the reality of collapse and the questions that come within this than the window that never stays open.

Also a meeting with a Palestinian who lives in the same neighborhood, Silwan—right outside of

the Old City—that my friend Naela came from. In 1998 she was murdered, a case to this day unsolved but probably because her family refused to sell their property to Jewish settlers. He and his family have also had problems with these settlers. They offer millions for small pieces of land, but once sold they are gone forever from the Palestinians. So selling dooms the Palestinians. One can imagine the pressure from all sides. Impossible.

I think of Naela often. Small, determined, totally secular. My last meeting with her, I felt a pressure on or within her. Something was different. Then months later, news of her death. I visited with her mother and then at her gravesite. Still with me. [...]

The sniper towers, the loudspeakers that bark in a language that cannot be deciphered, the Wall that stretches out to the far horizon; the return of the Jews to Israel that has become, at the same time, a place of no return.

Returning to no place. Another way of writing a history of the Holy Land? Crusaders, Muslim conquerors, Ottoman empire, European colonialists and now the Jews from Europe. The gravesites are many; the religious shrines are monumental, but also cold, forbidding, always feeling empty or, during certain religious festivals, filled with observers.

It's like everyone is an observer here, even the Israelis and Palestinians. Creating another layer of history, but also knowing that other layers are before them and more to come. There is also a sense that they may simply be a layer with no future place in the next layer.

A poll related to me by an Israeli; more than

fifty percent of Israelis don't think that Israel will be around in fifty years. He relayed these findings without emotion. But what population has that view of itself? That the country it just founded will disappear just after its hundredth birthday?

Strange and sobering. Some might think this to be my wish as well, especially with the suffering endured by the Palestinians. But confronted with this poll, I was rendered speechless. Imagine the violence that would accompany such a disappearance.

More than sobering. More than the slogan, Never Again! The reality or hope that Israel might disappear should not be entertained. Changed for sure. Transformed yes. Equality of Jew and Palestinian—a dream to be realized.

The disappearance of Israel—no.

Ashkelon, Israel, March 23

Marc Ellis

Arrived in Ashkelon last night—in the Negev a few miles from the Gaza border. Staying at Kibbutz Dorot awaiting the beginning of the conference in the morning—and, of course, my keynote address!

The drive down here, about 1 ½ hours from Jerusalem—a different world. Desert, farm land, large expanses of uncultivated land, quiet; the sky is clear, the stars overhead are bright, almost like you can touch them.

Dinner was left for us in our room; this morning we began at 9.

Good that I have had time with Zvi and Roni, and also other discussions with Israelis on the

left. How ignorant American Jews are on Israel! My keynote went well; the reception was more than polite. In fact, surprise of surprises and delightfully so, my respondent attacked me from the Left. Attack is too strong a word. Shlomo Sands from the University of Tel Aviv responded to my lecture—quite a character—and said that he was *not* interested in a Jewish state at all, rather a state of all of its citizens. That is a democracy.

It's complicated. He wants a Jewish majority for the foreseeable future—because of history and the antagonism of both sides that has built up over the years—but not forever; that would be racism. He also thought my concentration on the question of Jewishness to be retrogressive; what is Jewishness and how can it be defined? He told the audience that his respect for me increased as he read about the attacks on me by the American Jewish establishment; he, like most Israelis, had no respect for them.

Sands—again quite a character—is delightful and I fully enjoyed his criticism. Any criticism that says I am too conservative is enjoyed-invited. I could feel a big smile on my face and inside of me, a relaxation that said we can actually discuss matters at a deep level. So different from the discourse in America! So freeing!

Among Israelis I can actually be myself, and whether they think they are Jews or not, they are so Jewish in the best sense of the term. Confirmed again—my struggle is not with Jewishness, but with its ever narrowing understanding among Constantinian Jews.

So the rest of the day went well; I was quite relieved to have my keynote over, and I could go

back to listening. What a discussion! A new kind of politics in Israel, beyond the corruption and exploitation of the political system, beyond the use of the Holocaust and Israel as thought stoppers, as brakes on critical thought on the future. [...]

Late at night, a chat with two Israelis who have come for the program and teach at Sapir as well. Again, no feeling of Jewishness; the question is irrelevant for them and for the culture they say. Strong feelings that Israel is becoming a fascist state, toward the Palestinians and also within. The direction of Israeli politics within and outside Israeli society is, for them, a disaster. The upcoming elections—now less than a week away—promise only more of the same. No religiosity, none; they hate the religiosity they see around them, particularly in Jerusalem. Their dream: a world without religion. [...]

Rome, March 24

Marc Ellis

The airport went smoothly—only a few questions—and then we're off.

Quite a trip—and unexpected. Before I left for Israel I had vowed that this might be the last time I travel there or one more time—with my son Isaiah. I had turned down several recent offers to come to Israel. The whole thing had become too emotional for me; I had lost hope.

It wasn't hope I found this time; the situation is worse and worse. For a two-state solution—no hope at all. Politically a disaster. And yes, the Palestinians are completely subjugated, with only their numbers as protection. If Rubenstein is right

about the 20th century and beyond—of course he does not apply this to Palestinians!—that only the state can protect individuals and without that protection a people are essentially doomed, then the Palestinians are in deeper trouble than it appears.

My own sense is that now the entire Palestinian population is a refugee population and UNRA—the United Nations Relief Assistance program that has been dealing with Palestinian refugees since 1948—is the future for the entire Palestinian population. We are witnessing the UNRAization of Palestine.

So no hope as the cycle of violence and atrocity deepens. Still, a different sense about Israel and Israelis. Those Israelis with conscience are in need; they are in exile within Israel. In this situation they are reaching out for help, and a new solidarity is possible. I felt this solidarity and a freedom to express my Jewishness even with Israelis who feel that Jewishness is irrelevant! [...] Jews are safe and prosper when others are safe and prosper—where an interdependent empowerment is realized. This interdependence is never achieved once and for all; it needs to be struggled for everywhere and in every generation. Placing Jewish before state does nothing in this regard, for or against this struggle; it doesn't make any difference. Is that why Sands and others at the conference argued for a state of all its citizens rather than a Jewish state? The failure of a Jewish state is obvious to all but that failure is no more or less than any other state. The designation just raised the stakes, especially after the Holocaust, and the stakes have been lost.

This time in Israel I stood before a variety of

Walls, religious and security Walls, with my son, whose only sense—and a good one at that—is to be with the others who are oppressed, ghettoized, being herded through checkpoints and, at will, assassinated for the “good of the state”. In a Jewish state!

Certainly it is a novum in Jewish history that a father and son travel to Israel and witness these two types of Walls, walls that define the parameters of Jewishness in our time. [...]

Baghdad, March 28

R.

I sat late last night switching between Iraqi channels (the half dozen or so I sometimes try to watch). It’s a late-night tradition for me when there’s electricity, to see what the Iraqi channels are showing. Generally speaking, there still isn’t a truly ‘neutral’ Iraqi channel. The most popular ones are backed and funded by the different political parties currently vying for power. This became particularly apparent during the period directly before the elections.

I was trying to decide between a report on bird flu on one channel, a montage of bits and pieces from various *latmiyas* [Shiite religious celebrations in which the participants scourge themselves as a sign of mourning for the killing of the Prophet’s family] on another channel and an Egyptian soap opera on a third channel. I paused on the Sharqiya channel which many Iraqis consider to be a reasonably toned channel (and which during the elections showed its support for Al-lawi in particular). I was reading the little scrolling news headlines on the bottom of the page.

March 28. Elections in Israel. The Kadima Party, created by Ariel Sharon and now led by Ehud Olmert, obtains the relative majority of seats at the Knesset.

The usual: mortar fire on an area in Baghdad, an American soldier killed here, another one wounded there... twelve Iraqi corpses found in an area in Baghdad, etc. Suddenly, one of them caught my attention and I sat up straight on the sofa, wondering if I had read it correctly.

E. was sitting at the other end of the living room, taking apart a radio he later wouldn't be able to put back together. I called him over with the words: "Come here and read this; I'm sure I misunderstood...". He stood in front of the television and watched the words about corpses and Americans and puppets scroll by and when the news item I was watching for appeared, I jumped up and pointed. E. and I read it in silence and E. looked as confused as I was feeling.

The line said: "The Ministry of Defense requests that civilians do not comply with the orders of the army or police on nightly patrols unless they are accompanied by coalition forces working in that area". That's how messed up the country is at this point.

We switched to another channel, the 'Baghdad' channel, allied with Muhsin Abdul Hameed [the head of the Sunni *Iraqi Islamic Party*] and his group, and they had the same news item, but instead of the general "coalition forces" they had "American coalition forces". We checked two other channels. Iraqiya (pro-Da'awa) didn't mention it and Forat (pro-SCIRI) also didn't have it on their news ticker.

We discussed it today as it was repeated on another channel. "So what does it mean?" my cousin's wife asked as we sat gathered at lunch. "It means if they come at night and want to raid the house, we don't have to let them in," I an-

swered. “They’re not exactly asking your permission,” E. pointed out. “They break the door down and take people away, or have you forgotten?” “Well, according to the Ministry of Defense, we can shoot at them, right? It’s trespassing; they can be considered burglars or abductors...” I replied. The cousin shook his head: “If your family is inside the house, you’re not going to shoot at them. They come in groups, remember? They come armed and in large groups; shooting at them or resisting them would endanger people inside of the house”. “Besides that, when they first attack, how can you be sure they DON’T have Americans with them?” E. asked.

We sat drinking tea, mulling over the possibilities. It confirmed what has been obvious to Iraqis since the beginning: the Iraqi security forces are actually militias allied to religious and political parties. But it also brings to light other worrisome issues. The situation is so bad on the security front that the top two ministries in charge of protecting Iraqi civilians cannot trust each other. The Ministry of Defense can’t even trust its own personnel, unless they are “accompanied by American coalition forces”.

It really is difficult to understand what is happening lately. We hear about talks between Americans and Iran over security in Iraq, and then American ambassador in Iraq accuses Iran of funding militias inside of the country. Today there are claims that Americans killed between 20 to 30 men from Sadr’s militia in an attack on a *husseiniya* yesterday. The Americans are claiming that responsibility for the attack should be placed on Iraqi security forces (the same security forces they are constantly commending). All of

this directly contradicts claims by Bush and other American politicians that Iraqi troops and security forces are in control of the situation. Or maybe they are in control, just not in a good way.

They've been finding corpses all over Baghdad for weeks now, and it's always the same: holes drilled in the head, multiple shots or strangulation, like the victims were hung. Execution, militia style. Many of the people were taken from their homes by security forces: police or special army brigades... Some of them were rounded up from mosques.

A few days ago we went to pick up one of my female cousins from college. Her college happens to be quite close to the local morgue. E., our cousin L., and I all sat in the car which, due to traffic, we parked slightly further away from the college to wait for our other cousin. I looked over at the commotion near the morgue. There were dozens of people: mostly men, standing around in a bleak group. Some of them smoked cigarettes, others leaned on cars or pick-up trucks... Their expressions varied: grief, horror, resignation. On some faces, there was an anxious look of combined dread and anticipation. It's a very specific look, one you will find only outside the Baghdad morgue. The eyes are wide and bloodshot, as if searching for something, the brow is furrowed, the jaw is set and the mouth is a thin frown. It's a look that tells you they are walking into the morgue, where the bodies lay in rows, and that they pray they do not find what they are looking for.

The cousin sighed heavily and told us to open a couple of windows and lock the doors: he was going to check the morgue. A month before, his wife's uncle had been taken away from a mosque

during prayer; they've yet to find him. Every two days, someone from the family goes to the morgue to see if his body was brought in. "Pray I don't find him... or rather... I just; we hate the uncertainty." My cousin sighed heavily and got out of the car. I said a silent prayer as he crossed the street and disappeared into the crowd.

E. and I waited patiently for H., who was still inside the college and for L. who was in the morgue. The minutes stretched and E. and I sat silently, small talk seeming almost blasphemous under the circumstances. L. came out first. I watched him tensely and found myself chewing away at my lower lip, "Did he find him? *In-shalla* he didn't find him..." I said to no one in particular. As he got closer to the car, he shook his head. His face was immobile and grim, but behind the grim expression, we could see relief: "He's not there. *Hamdulilah* [Thank God]." "*Hamdulilah*" E. and I repeated the words in unison.

We all looked back at the morgue. Most of the cars had simple, narrow wooden coffins on top of them, in anticipation of the son or daughter or brother. One frenzied woman in a black *abaya* was struggling to make her way inside, two relatives holding her back. A third man was reaching up to untie the coffin tied to the top of their car. "See that woman: they found her son. I saw them identifying him. A bullet to the head". The woman continued to struggle, her legs suddenly buckling under her, her wails filling the afternoon, and although it was surprisingly warm that day, I pulled at my sleeves, trying to cover my suddenly cold fingers.

We continued to watch the various scenes of

grief, anger, frustration and every once in a while, an almost tangible relief as someone left the morgue having not found what they dreaded most to find: eyes watery from the smell, the step slightly lighter than when they went in, having been given a temporary reprieve from the worry of claiming a loved one from the morgue.

Gaza, March 31

Laila El-Haddad

“You better duck when that awful sound goes / Boom / That’s what’s happenin’ in the parking lot / That’s what’s happenin’ on stage / Bang bang, that awful sound / Bang bang, that awful sound.”

“The Roots” and Nancy Sinatra; what better way to describe another day in paradise... er, Gaza. I heard that phrase a lot, paradise. Of people describing their homes, their gardens, their razed orchards. They don’t see the war and the destruction and the lawlessness and all of the ugliness of occupation and anarchy. They see beauty.

Living here is always surreal, to it mildly. But you learn to compartmentalize and move on with your life. Internalize, adapt and survive. Sometimes, for a moment, I try and detach this adapted self from my body, to regain perspective.

Yesterday I was having mint tea and date cookies at my cousin’s house, who is here visiting from the UK where her husband is completing his Ph.D. Her father-in-law, a fiery little man of 80-something years, was debating with his son, something about the differences of the Palestinian educational system “then and now”, as Yousuf sat trying to compete for Dalia’s (my cousin’s daughter’s) attention, playing with her

dolls and baby stroller (yes, my son is in touch with his feminine side).

And swirling all around us, as entertainment for the evening, was a “symphony” of war, as people like to describe it here. The distinct double-boom of tank artillery shells, BOOM boom, every few seconds, along with the single explosions of what I would later learn were navy-gunship attacks, interspersed with rapid machine-gun fire, a swarm of drones whirring incessantly overhead, and Apache helicopters attacking areas in northern and eastern Gaza.

My cousin told her daughter they were just fireworks and not to be alarmed, so she too (four years old) casually ignored them.

The shelling ceased for a while after that, until around 3 am when we were literally shocked awake by a tremendous explosion. Just two streets down from us, an F16 warplane had dropped bomb on a playing field [...]. The field was empty, but the explosion left a tremendous crater and its sheer force scared us senseless. At first we thought it might be a sonic boom, but it did not have the distinct after-echo that accompanies that. This explosion was so loud I thought I might find the street in front of me taken out; that our doomsday was upon us. Sometimes I think when it comes I might not know the difference. We weren't sure what was happening, and because of the drones overhead, all the television satellite signals were scrambled, so we panicked and held hands in bed until it passed.

It's quiet again this morning. The sun is out. Yousuf is taking his nap. Beit Lahiya wild berries are in season. Bees are pollinating with spring's explosion of color and fertility. [...]

I've always loved Fridays in Gaza. In the mornings, save for the lone garbage collector futilely sweeping the abandoned streets and municipal park, littered with plastic cups, watermelon seeds, and strangled straws from the night before, the hustle and bustle of the city comes to a standstill. It is a serene if lethargic time, an escape from the sea of chaos, uncertainty and violence that grips our lives each waking day and night. For a few hours, things seem ordinary in a place where ordinary is an illusion. And it doesn't seem like anything can disrupt those moments, as if some force is saying to the madness that envelops us: "Come back another hour!". Slowly, the streets come to life again as evening takes hold. This is Yousuf's favorite time. He likes to go out to the balcony, as we did yesterday, and "people watch". In the park in front of us, children boisterously played football, women licked ice cream cones and chatted, and wedding motorcades (*zaffit ayyarat*), which, no matter what the season or situation, you can always expect to hear on Thursday and Friday evenings like clockwork, made their way to beachside hotels and lounges. They tirelessly honked their horns in sync with wedding *dabke* music, blaring out from portable speakers or played by live for-hire bands seated in the back of rented pick-up trucks decorated with carnations. Boys and relatives clamored for a standing space in the back of the trucks, dancing and clapping feverishly along with the music. Young children chase them down the street to join in the fun. If the wind is just right, the sky becomes a showcase of homemade

kites, dancing and flirting with each other, challenging the physical bounds imposed upon this battered area's residents, reaching to places they can only dream about, allowing them to navigate freedom, no matter how purposeless, for just a little bit. In the distance, the ubiquitous double-thuds of artillery fire could be heard exploding a few kilometers away, increasing in number and intensity, it seemed, as the evening progressed, only to be drowned out ever-so-slightly by the cacophonous symphony of Friday blitheness, as if to say: "Not today! Today, you will not steal our moment". The evening passes, the clock strikes midnight, and suddenly the carriage transforms into a pumpkin again. The magic dissipates. And 6 people are dead. Just another Gaza Friday.

Gaza, April 15

Laila El-Haddad

[...] It's official (ok, semi-official): save for a minor post-nursery, pre-and-post nap relapse, after 2 years, 1 month, 6 days, I have officially weaned Yousuf (hey, don't look at me funny: Alaskan Eskimos breastfeed for 5 years!). For those who don't know, I am an ardent, some would say zealous, breastfeeding advocate. Simply put, it is one of the most amazing abilities God granted women, everything from the way it is produced, to the way the content changes based on your child's nutritional needs (c'mon, can Nestle do THAT?): it is the perfect infant food. I always planned to breastfeed Yousuf until he was around 2 years old, the age recommended in the Quran (though that is not to say one cannot breastfeed for longer than this), and because

we both enjoyed it and benefited from it (when you shed 500 calories a day producing breast milk, who needs a gym?).

Unfortunately, that turned out to be easier said than done. Every time I would get up and say to myself, “this is the day to reclaim my...”, I would grow weak in the face of his pathetic blubbling and heart-wrenching cries... “looolooooo!!” (my nickname)...

It was as if I was depriving him from the one certainty in his life, the one constant. And now I was telling him that it is no longer available for his use and abuse, whenever and however frequently he wanted. During the difficult times we live in, it was a step I was always afraid to take. It was his comfort zone, and I was taking it away. *My little babe is all grown up.*

For Yousuf and I, the past two years have been an interesting journey, to put it mildly, wrought with the obvious hurdles of living under occupation, and nursing him has helped us both get through it. It was our moment together, our special time that, though time-consuming and difficult at times, we both equally enjoyed, that no one could interfere with, no matter the time or circumstance (save for an hour when I was interrogated by the Shin Bet [Israel Security Service] in Rafah, and a then two-month-old Yousuf was howling in the other room with a female soldier because they forbid me from taking him in the interrogation with me).

It was something no one else could provide him, something that I will always relish (though I have to admit at times in the early days, I began to feel biologically equivalent in life purpose to a cow...). Further, my ability to breastfeed him, to

be a portable milk machine, has gotten us through some rough times, especially during travel. I think back to those terrible times and shiver, only to be comforted by the fact that it was the nursing that sometimes got Yousuf past the hours-long waits in the painful heat of August or bone-numbing cold of winter at checkpoints or at Rafah Crossing, waiting for the Israeli “uber-wardens” to let us through, bellowing out orders to the thousands of desperate travelers including ourselves. And knowing that our chances of making it through on any given day were contingent upon the mood of the soldier manning the checkpoint. When a young, heat-exhausted Yousuf was on his final crying breath, hysterical, hungry, and confused, I would nurse him quietly in the taxi as we waited and waited and waited, and bam, like magic he would calm down and sleep. And that meant so could I.

So now, here we are. It’s hard enough weaning my little babe and dealing with his mommy-milk withdrawal, but to try doing so under the continuous barrage of Israeli artillery shells... well. After a brief lull (and I use lull cautiously here... meaning a few hours), the shelling resumed last night full throttle following a rocket that landed in an Ashkelon sports stadium (kind of ironic, given the Israeli attack on Gaza’s stadium a few weeks ago). The explosions were more frequent and powerful than before. At one point, I counted 10 shells falling per minute, some from different locations at once, whose shock waves we could literally feel penetrating the house, rattling its windows and leaving the walls trembling.

Needless to say, we got minimal sleep (from that and the constant ringing of my Orange cellphone from who turned out to be an Israeli caller looking for a “Tsedek” and then “Isabel”... and me futilely explaining to him in broken Hebrew that it was the wrong number, while leaving out the detail that he had actually called a Palestinian in Gaza).

Usually if Yousuf wakes up, I can nurse him back to sleep, but now we no longer have that to fall back on. He is taking it all like a champ, especially after I ‘explained’ to him that breast-feeding, “azza” as he calls it, is for babies, and that he was now a big boy. After a few initial “Yeah right!” episodes, he seemed to understand. Sometimes he looks at me if he is tempted to lift my shirt, and says: “Lal baby?” (for baby?), looking for confirmation.

My friend recommended pumping my milk and donating it to a local hospital. I explained something I assumed most people knew (ok, I was wrong), that actually in Islam, any children who breast-feed or drink from the same breastmilk under the age of two “five times” become “milk siblings”, meaning they cannot intermarry etc.

This is not to say that it doesn’t happen or is discouraged (in pre-Islamic Arabia, babies were sent off to be nursed by a wet-maid because it was thought that nursing from more than one mother gives the child greater strength and immunity, and the Prophet himself had a milk brother), but it has to happen with the permission of both families, and also means you have to keep track of who you’ve breastfed. So anonymous breast-milk donation is not an option. [...]

Gaza, April 17

Laila El-Haddad

[...] Thousands of Palestinians—mothers, sisters, daughters, sons—from all different factions filled the streets of Gaza City today to commemorate Palestinian Prisoner’s Day, April 17. Palestinians marched through the streets of Gaza to the Palestinian Legislative Council, carrying pictures of their imprisoned family members and in some cases symbolically tying their hands together with chains. [...] The issue of the prisoners is a uniting factor, a common denominator amongst Palestinians. [...] Palestinians have been subjected to the highest rate of incarceration in the world—since the beginning of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories in 1967: over 650,000 Palestinians have been detained by Israel, constituting some 20% of the total Palestinian population, and 40% of all Palestinian men.

Gaza, April 21

Laila El-Haddad

Something strange is happening in Gaza. Municipal workers are actually working. The streets seem a bit cleaner. And for once, I actually saw a policeman arresting a criminal in a dramatic pick-up the other day, much to the chagrin of his gang, who stoned and shot at the police car (futilely), and the “oohs” and “aahs” of onlookers (including myself). In Gaza, we have become accustomed to the rule of law-lessness. And people are sick of it; in fact 84%, according to a recent poll, place internal security as their top priority. [...] This is not to say that gangs and armed

gunmen somehow roam the streets, as the mainstream media would make it seem. But for sure, it is brawn and bullets that win the day, and decide everything from family disputes to basic criminal proceedings. [...] When there is no one around to enforce the law—or rather, no one *able* to enforce the law, other than verbal condemnations—there is little else that can be done. If the accused was jailed, his family would inevitably intervene, hiring gunmen to break him out or taking it out against another member of his family. It's a vicious cycle. Citizens don't feel accountable and law enforcers are impotent. This is where Hamas's power of moral suasion comes into play. I've seen it at work in areas such as Dair al-Balah, which was spared the bloody clan disputes that areas such as Khan Yunis and Beit Lahiya suffered when the Hamas-elected Municipality leader intervened. Of course, they have no magic wand, but they seem very effective at what they do, and their networks and ability to 'talk' to people as 'one of the people' resonates well. [...]

Baghdad, April 22

R.

It's officially spring in Baghdad. We jokingly say that in Iraq, spring doesn't exist. We go immediately from cold, windy weather to a couple of months of humidity and dust storms, to a blazing, dry heat, i.e. summer. This is the month, however, for rolling up the carpeting and rugs and taking out the summer clothes.

Unpacking the summer clothes and putting away the winter clothes is a process that takes about a week in our household. When the transition from

winter clothes to summer clothes is finally over, the house ends up smelling of naphthalene, and unused hand soap, which is sometimes used to store clothes or linen in order to ward off insects. Besides the usual 'spring cleaning', etc., the last few weeks have been volatile, even by Iraqi standards. The area of A'adhamiya in Baghdad has seen some heavy fighting, especially during the last week. There's almost always some action in A'adhamiya but a week ago it got to the point where there was open fighting in the streets between Ministry of Interior militias and guerrillas. As a result of this, we have an elderly relative staying with us. Her son, my mother's second cousin, dropped her off at our house with the words: "Her heart can't take all the excitement. Some bullets shattered the windows on the second floor and we thought she was going to have a heart attack".

Apparently, prior to this latest outbreak of violence in A'adhamiya, there was a 'silent agreement' between the guerrillas and the Iraqi police that no attacks would be launched against Iraqi security forces in the area as long as Iraqi special commandos (Interior Ministry militias) would not attack homes in the area as they have been doing for the last year.

So we've been spending the days with Bibi Z. ('Bibi' being a Baghdadi word meaning 'nana' or 'granny'). We don't know her exact age, but we estimate she's well into her eighties. She has a deceptively frail look about her: soft, almost transparent skin, a small face framed with long wisps of white hair. Her dark eyes are still very alive and have a look of permanent fascination because her brows are so white they barely show up against her skin.

Having the distinction of being the oldest member of an Iraqi family has its privileges. Bibi Z. has installed herself as temporary reigning queen of the household, moving from room to room with the grace and authority of royalty. Within ten minutes of arriving at our house, she occupied my room and I was promptly relegated to the uncomfortable sofa in the living room. She spends the hours supervising everything from homework to housework, and inevitably advising on the best ways to store winter clothes, roll up the carpeting, and study algebra. Although she no longer cooks, she sometimes deigns to sample our cooking and always finds it in need of a spoon of this, or a pinch of that.

It's always fascinating to sit with one of the older generation of Iraqis. They inspire mixed feelings; they've seen so much tragedy and triumph living in a country like Iraq that it leaves one feeling both excited at the possibilities and frustrated with what seems to be a lifetime of instability.

Bibi Z.'s first memories are of the monarchy and she clearly remembers all the other subsequent governments and leaders; she even has gossip about some of the ones making a comeback now. "That young fellow wanting to be the king" she says of Al Sharif Ali [leader of the Iraqi Constitutional Monarchy political party and pretender to the Iraqi throne]. "I think he's the result of an affair between one of the princesses and an Egyptian palace servant" she confides, as we watch him in a brief reportage on one of the Iraqi channels. At around 10 am this morning, the electricity went out and it was too early for the generator. I commented that we wouldn't be able to see what had happened overnight unless we listened to the

radio. Bibi Z. told us about the first television she saw, in 1957. One of their wealthier neighbors had acquired a television and as soon as her husband headed off to work, the ladies in the area would gather at her house to watch an hour of television. “We would put on our *abbayas* when the male tv presenter was speaking,” she laughed. “It took Umm Adil two weeks to convince us that the presenter couldn’t see us just as we saw him.”

“And were the politicians just as bad?” I asked later as we watched Ja’affari make some comments. “History repeats itself... Politicians are opportunists... But they don’t worry me; they were bad, but Iraqis were better.” She continued to explain that through all of the drama and change that combine to form the colorful mosaic of the Iraqi political scene during the previous century, one thing remained constant: Iraqi loyalty and solicitude towards one another.

She talked of the student revolts during the years of the monarchy. “When Iraq signed the Portsmouth Treaty [drawn up between Iraq and Great Britain in 1948, it perpetuated British protection over Iraq], the students revolted and organized demonstrations against the king; they were chased throughout Baghdad. My father was a police officer and yet when they chased the students into our area, we slipped them into the house and helped them get away by jumping from rooftop to rooftop. Iraqis were Iraqis and we had our differences, but we took care of each other... And women and children were sacred: no one dared touch the women and children of the house.”

The one unforgivable sin back then was to have loyalties to the foreign occupier. “Today, the only ones who can guarantee their survival are the ones with the loyalties to an occupier, and even they aren’t safe.” She sighed heavily as she said this, her prayer beads clicking gently in her thin hands.

“For the first time in many years, I fear death.” She said last night to no one in particular, as we sat around after dinner, sipping tea. We all objected, wishing her a longer life, telling her she had many years ahead of her, God willing. She shook her head at us like we didn’t understand, couldn’t possibly understand. “All people die eventually and I’ve had a longer life than most Iraqis; today children and young people are dying. I only fear death because I was born under a foreign occupation... I never dreamed I would die under one.”

From an Old Man

Here

notes from the present

I have no more to say. I have already said everything. There is still something I want to say, though. I search my mind, but cannot find anything. There must be something, though. What? My mind has become silent. No doubt this is good. There is something sacred about silence. It

Giorgio De Maria

is the voice of Eternity and of the Infinite. They both have no voice. I should be happy about this. However, as I have written a lot in my life, and I was happy when writing, I should now find new happiness in silence. It is the happiness of merely being among the living. Why am I not content with this though? There is something excessive about me. Is this an effect of my old age? If I were younger, it would all be different. But I am not younger. On the contrary, the more time passes the less young I become. I would like to be able to stop time. But time rolls on and it is impossible for me to stop it. It advances every second. Time is cruel. Yet I could do nothing without it. Time is a blessing after all. Even now, while writing these words, time is helping me. I thank it.

Tomorrow will be another day, and the days in my life are all well numbered. How many are there? I am not entitled to know. I could only know if I killed myself; but I know that killing oneself is a sin, and that's why I will not do that. I am a devout man after all. I am very afraid of Hell. I know little or nothing about Heaven. I wonder if my mind will be as silent in Heaven (if I am lucky enough to get there) as it is now; or rather, will there be bursts of creative imagination in Heaven? Let's wait and see what happens to me after death. Whether there is nothingness or something. In both cases it is a great mystery. I am fascinated by mystery. But I would like to explore it and look into it clearly. Though I might be disappointed. Perhaps the mystery is not as great as I imagine. It may be a *mistero buffo*, as a certain Dario Fo said. It may all be a comic thing. Better not to know.

What shall I be doing tomorrow? Maybe the same things as I have done today. My eyes will still be blindfolded about the mystery of life. Nothingness would be pure logic. If only one microbe existed in the Universe, that microbe would be a violation. But there is not just one microbe, there are stars, planets, whole galaxies. And among these galaxies there is a planet which is surely inhabited, by thinking beings even, and that is ours. We are not entitled to know what there may be elsewhere. If there had been other thinking beings like us, the Lord would not have visited Earth only, but would have toured round other worlds, which is ridiculous in the extreme. There is no doubt that, of all planets, ours is the only inhabited one.

But I realize I am wondering off the point. I was writing about my mental silence, and suddenly, with these pseudo-philosophical thoughts, I broke that silence to some extent. Perhaps I will have another burst of imagination before I close my eyes forever. I hope so. I may still be able to write another novel... or a tale. It would be a wonderful thing for me, but I doubt this will happen. Instead, days of an even denser silence will come. And this scares me. It scares me because I have a cast-iron constitution, and despite my being old already, I might become extremely old.

My father died at 94. He used to spend his days in bed fully dressed and wet himself. Then, one morning, he asked the nurse what time it was. She replied: "It's eight o'clock". Once he knew the time, he closed his eyes and died. My piano teacher also died when she was as old as my father. She had been a great pianist; but after the age of ninety on she stayed in bed, and said she

played music in her mind. I'm sure her fingers could no longer move. I am very grateful to that woman: I can play the piano and when I do, my anguish moves away.

Yes, because anguish often seizes me. It is as if I were extremely tired of living. It comes early in the morning, then it slowly wears off. And love for life slowly comes over me again. It is taking hold of me now too, while I am writing. I am writing in the afternoon, after having had my daily lunch. I am not a lonely man, even though I no longer have any friends. I have a wife I love, she is an artist and paints beautifully. And I have children and grandchildren. That's right, I am a grandfather. All this should be enough for me: music and a numerous family. And yet it is not enough, I am always expecting something else. Although I do not know what. I said I had nothing to say, and yet I can't stop talking. By dint of stirring my brain, that jellied mass inside my skull, my brain is waking. It is traversed by a whirlwind of imagination. It wishes to tell something. A story... a tale... Yes, a tale.

Gaza, April 22

Laila El-Haddad

I'm writing this in pitch darkness. Not due to artillery shells, from which we've been spared for a whole 24 hours. But because the friendly folks of al-Aqsa Martyrs (or as I like to call them, my friendly neighborhood gunmen) shot our neighborhood's electricity cables by accident this evening, after hoisting their flag on the now Hamas-dominated Legislative Council in front of my house in protest of recent Hamas statements

(someone needs target practice). Then again, better the cable than me. Last night, they also decide to hold a pre-dawn bash, smack dab in the middle of the city (deciding to avoid areas populated by Hamas), which continued until the wee hours of the morning. [...]

The Hamas political head in Syria, Khalid Meshal, [...] said, roughly: “We can understand Israel and America persecuting us, and seeking ways to besiege and starve us, but not the sons of our people who are plotting against us, who are following a carefully laid out plan to make us fail. Today is not the time to expose them, but the day will come soon when we will reveal to all the truth in detail about all they have done”. [...]

Fateh of course wouldn't have it, immediately issuing a condemnatory statement through their revolutionary council accusing Meshal of “igniting a civil war” by calling Abbas a traitor (Meshal never mentioned Abbas by name, but made veiled references. He later apologized and said he was misunderstood, calling for dialogue).

But it wasn't long before young Fateh cadres, *Fateh shabeeba* as they are called here [...] took to the streets in wild protest, along with hooligans looking for ‘fun’ and any chance to lash out at Hamas, shooting belt after belt with automatic weapons, and keeping me awake a good part of the night (not to mention disrupting a really good chapter in the book I was reading). As my cousin noted, “young people here are so bored, you have no idea. These are a bunch of young *shabab* with nothing better to do. They are a small contingent of Fateh looking for any opportunity to lash out at Hamas”, whom they hate, some have confessed

to me, “more than the Israeli occupation itself”. Today, the clashes spilled over into the rival universities of Al-Azhar (Fateh run) and al-Islamiya (Islamic University, run by Hamas). Apparently, the Fateh student council in al-Islamiya, and later, Al-Azhar students, both plastered the pristine walls of al-Islamiya with condemnatory and accusatory flyers. Push came to shove (quite literally), and though it did not get fatal and weapons were not involved, around 15 people were injured in fistfights, stone throwing, and firebombs.

Amidst the madness, a lone vendor roamed around the angry crowds selling licorice juice to thirsty stone-throwers (honestly, only in Palestine...). All that was missing, joked my cousin, was a kiosk selling souvenirs, perhaps t-shirts and hats stating “anti-Hamas protests 2006—I was there!”. I’m sure the local PLO flag shop could make some big bucks.

According to my cousin, it’s not all bad. The university (she attends al-Azhar, the only university at the time of her enrollment that taught Information Technology) is now on strike for 3 days, which means time off to study for exams. “Catastrophes for some, benefit for others,” she smiled. [...]

For now, the streets are calm once again, Yousuf is sound asleep... and looks like the electricity just came back on. So I think I’ll continue reading my book while it’s quiet...

Contributors and translators

Here

notes from the present

Johanna Bishop (icchiojo@tiscali.it) was born in Chicago in 1974, and lived in Pennsylvania and New York before moving to Tuscany in 1998. She translates from Italian into English. In this issue she has translated Bruno De Maria's *The Praise of Idiocy*.

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Sebastiano Buonamico lives in Sesto San Giovanni (Milan). A graphic designer and a photographer, his photographs have been shown in several exhibitions. He is the author of the covers of this magazine.

cover

Brigitte Ciaramella (brigitte.ciaramella@fastwebnet.it) was born in 1966 and was brought up bilingual Italian/English. She is a freelance translator with a special interest in literary works. In this issue she has translated the text by Giorgio De Maria.

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Bruno De Maria was born in Turin and lives in Milan. A psychoanalyst, he collaborates for several magazines. He has also published a novel. His text was translated by Johanna Bishop.

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Giorgio De Maria was born in 1924 in Turin, where he lives. He has contributed to several newspapers and reviews and has written a few novels. His text was translated by Brigitte Ciaramella.

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Laila El-Haddad, born in 1978, lives in Gaza. She is a journalist. Her diary pages come from the blog *Raising Yousuf: a diary of a mother under occupation* (<http://a-mother-from-gaza.blogspot.com>). We thank her for allowing us to publish them.

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Marc H. Ellis was born in North Miami Beach, Florida, in 1952. He is University Professor of Jewish Studies and Director of the Center for Jewish Studies at Baylor University (Waco, Texas). He has authored fifteen books and edited five others, among them: *Israel and Palestine: Out of the Ashes: The Search for Jewish Identity in the Twenty-First Century*, Pluto Press, London-Sterling, Va., 2002; and *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation: the Challenge of the Twenty-First Century*, 3rd expanded ed., Baylor University Press, Waco, Tex., 2004. Ellis' many articles have been published in diverse American and international publications, including "International Herald Tribune", "Jordan Times", "Journal of Palestine Studies", and "Ha'aretz".

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Roberto Giannoni, born in 1934 in Genoa, lives in Milan. He has published a few collections of verses in the Liguria dialect. His poem, originally in the Genoa dialect, was translated by Gayle Ridinger.

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R. “I am 26 years old, I’m a woman who lives in Baghdad. I have a degree in computer sciences but I currently work from the house because it is not very safe in other places. Before the war, I worked for a private computer company.” Her diary pages published here come from the blog *Baghdad burning* (riverbendblog.blogspot.com). We thank her for allowing us to publish them.

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70, 83

Gayle Ridinger, an American, has lived in Milan, Italy, since 1981. She teaches English writing skills and Italian-English translation techniques at the State University of East Piedmont in Vercelli, Italy. The author of novels and short stories, she is also the translator of Camillo Sbarbaro’s collection *Shavings: Selected Prose Poems 1914-1940*, Chelsea Editions, New York 2005, and the translator and co-editor of the anthology *Italian Poetry 1950-1990*, Dante University of America Press, Boston 1996. She is the author of the children’s book *A star at the bottom of the sea*, G. Stevens Pub., Milwaukee, WI, 2002. Here she has translated Roberto Giannoni’s *One Night (or a Thousand)*.

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Subscription

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