

Our Blood in a Spoon

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'Eugenie Dolberg's *Open Shutters Iraq*', *Aperture*, no. 203, Summer 2011, pp. 74-6.

How to represent, photographically, the devastation of an entire country? You can, to take a first step, photograph its ruins. You can show the destroyers in their triumph, exerting their ownership of the place. You can photograph the oppressed, the tortured, the wounded, the imprisoned and the dead. All these depictions have come out of Iraq: Simon Norfolk, to take one example, has made meticulous large-format photographs of ruined buildings, seductive in their picturesque qualities, and eloquent about the powers that caused the damage. Many others have dwelled on the lives of the conquerors, particularly those at the spearhead of battle. Some were embedded with the troops in a Pentagon scheme to ensure spectacular news coverage and to encourage sympathy through forced companionship. Visceral and at the same time hackneyed images focused on the sweat and strain of the combat zone, and the soldiers' fears, privations, comradely relations and, above all, on the violence that they portion out. Photographers took mortal risks to make such pictures yet often remained remote from those who lived in the crosshairs.

It is generally left to the unembedded photojournalists, who work with still greater dangers, to photograph the Iraqis from a position closer to their point of view. Some, such as Ghaith Abdul Ahad, have documented the resistance fighters, and civilians trying to live through the extraordinary chaos and violence into which their nation was plunged. Others, including Stephanie Sinclair, worked with Iraqi families in their bereavement. And, of course, the troops — women among them — have made their own photographic amusements notorious.

From both sides of the embedding divide, we have seen images of Iraqis held at gunpoint, obtrusively searched, made captive, abused in the street (heads ground into the dust by US boots, a sight that evokes Orwell), wounded, disfigured and killed, and

these images have proliferated across websites. In some nations (though, usually, not ours), they even make the news. Caught between the censorship rules imposed by the US authorities and the Iraqi government, and the growing dangers posed by the multitude of murderous sectarian groups, such images became increasingly difficult to make. In a mutual reinforcement, as they disappeared from mass media circulation, Iraq fell from the headlines. The war was no longer ours, so it was said, or was over, or the situation was becoming calmer—and the lack of pictures seemed to prove it.

A book of photographic essays by Iraqi women breaks open the regime of silence that envelops this war. Eugenie Dolberg worked with Iraqi women from Baghdad, Falluja, Kirkuk, Mosul and Basra in 2006-7, teaching them photography in the safety of Damascus, and encouraging them collectively to reflect on their lives. Taking pictures in Iraq, they returned to Syria for writing and editing workshops. While the women were divided by religion and political affiliation, strong common currents emerged, in particular of the length of their sufferings in the succession of conflicts that the West was variously involved in, from the war with Iran onwards, and the slow strangulation of the nation by sanctions. As Dolberg writes:

I had lived in the Middle East for some time, but nothing had prepared me for the stories I heard... I had no idea about the severity of the Iraqi experience in the last few decades; no one had escaped unspeakable loss and trauma and no one had had a moment to recover.

The strength of the results, especially in the way photographs and texts work together, speaks not only to Dolberg's talents as a teacher but also to the power of collective reflection and learning.



Irada Al Jabbouri undertook the very difficult and dangerous work of finding women who were able and willing to participate in the project. Travel was hard and risky; street photography, alone and without the protection of arms, very perilous, though the hijab, forced on women in public, is at least a good garment to conceal a camera. Some of the women had received death threats or had been kidnapped even before the project began, and all (in a situation where the very idea of women making their views heard is objectionable to some fanatics) are known only by their first names.

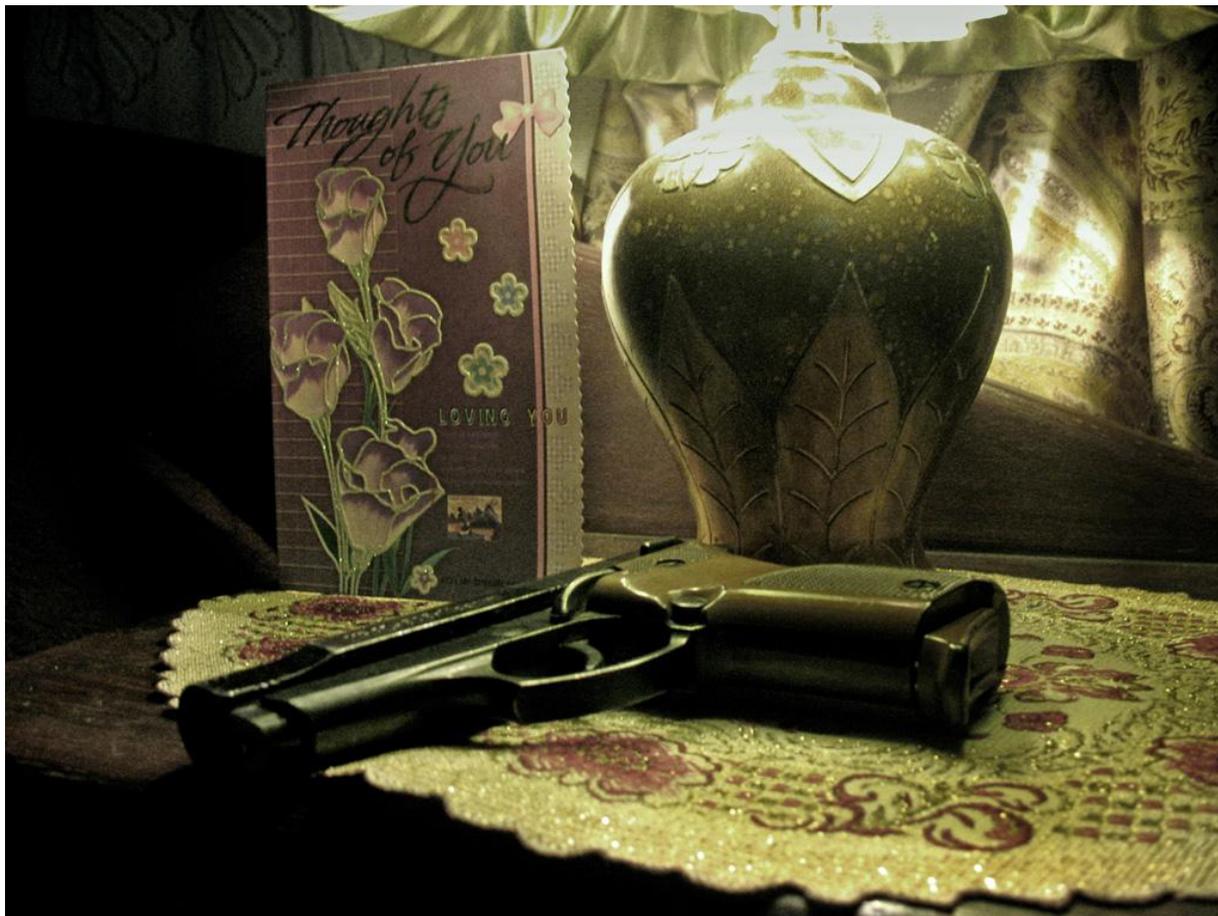
Of the common themes that emerge, the terror of daily life is the most present. Sarab writes:

If someone is not home by 5pm and you cannot reach them by phone, everybody in the family is paralysed with fear and the image of their body riddled with bullets and thrown on a rubbish heap.

So many lives are maimed by grief for loved ones who have met violent ends; and all are marked by continual fear for those left. As Marian puts it:

Whenever I leave the house, I say farewell to my mother—it is as if we are all carrying our blood in a spoon—trying not to spill it.

A consequence, particularly for women, is that many live under what amounts to a house arrest, in which any breaking of the informal rules of confinement may be punished by torture, rape and death. The book contains many doleful views through shuttered windows onto ravaged streets—photographs taken by prisoners.



The shutting in of bodies is accompanied, again particularly for women, though by no means only for them, with the closing down of education, and attacks on the freedom of thought that it may foster. Raya made her photo-story about the 2007 bombing of Al Mutanabbi Street, a centre for bookshops and intellectual life in Baghdad of. She writes

of those who starved rather than sell their books during the long years of sanctions.
After the bombing:

I stand in the ruins of the Shabandar, the only remaining literary café in Baghdad. I am dazzled by the ash and the blackness. Where did all the poets, writers, journalists, retired people, liberals, Communists and even Ba'athists go? Where are all the photographs of Baghdad in the 20's and 40's that used to line the walls?



In fragments of prose, there arises the vision of a various and sophisticated society, which persisted despite the dictatorship, and far exceeded its mass media image in the West; and of a society that was torn up, ostensibly to decapitate the regime. Raya continues:

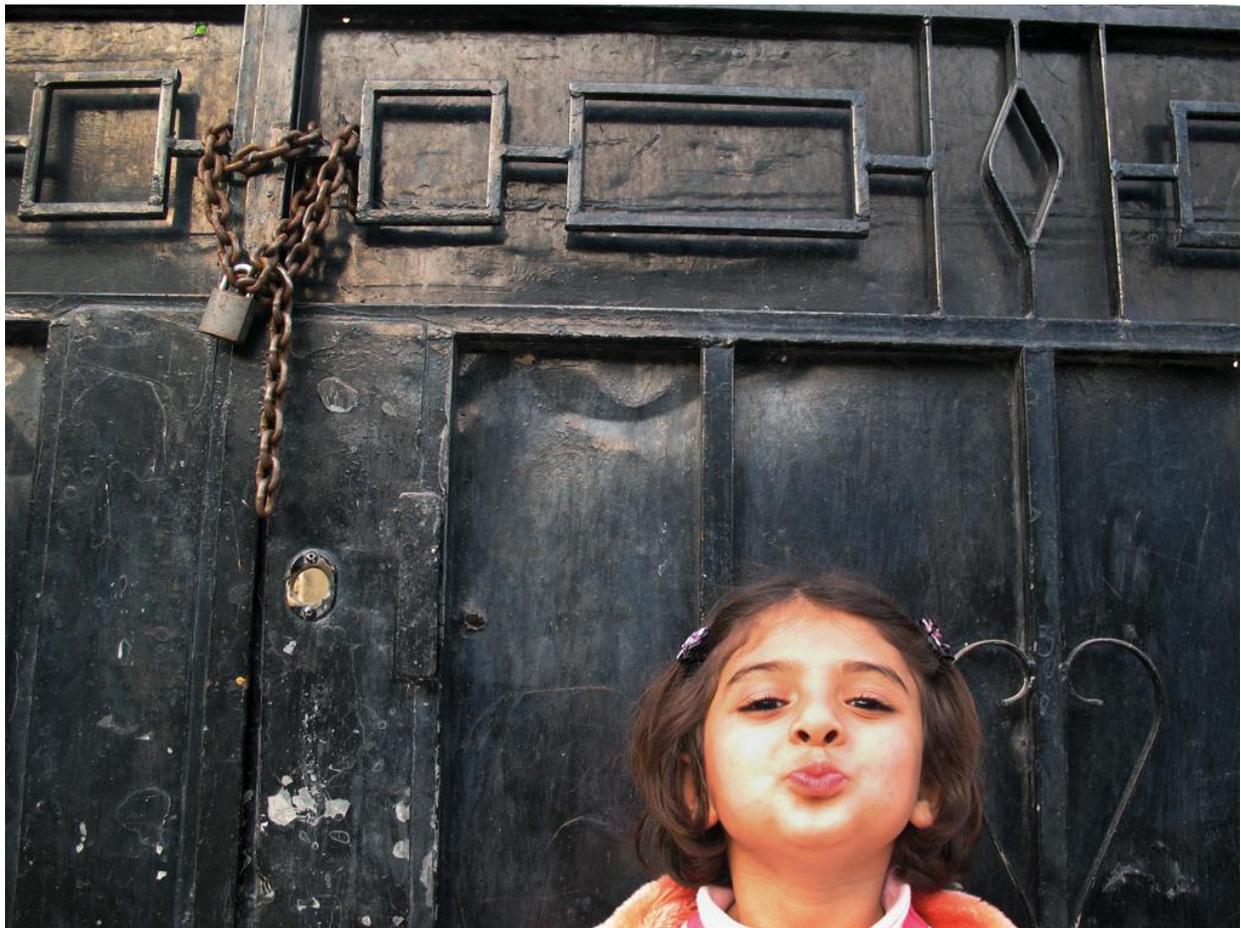
I watch people's feet and I remember how my own grew year after year as I walked down this street. What an illusion to think that my son would be able to grow up here. We stand mourning the ashes of the books, the destruction of the street and the bodies of our sons, which we can't even find.



Two other women took photographs in the street—Lujane in Baghdad and Um Mohammed in Basra. Both describe, in words and finely composed pictures, the utter ruination of their cities. Lujane points to a government campaign to beautify Baghdad which turned out to be limited to painting the concrete separation walls and bomb barriers with Iraqi flags. As she puts it: 'The streets are empty of everything but destruction, concrete barriers and barbed wire.' Both photograph sites of former city life

and recreation—amusement parks, bridges and riversides, cinemas and restaurants empty and stripped of all beauty. Um Mohammed writes:

Everything in Basra is forbidden now: laughter, coloured clothes, music, walking in the markets, going to the parks. Everything beautiful has been stolen from my city. And the British, who came in the name of liberating Iraq, just watch it all, smiling.



There is power to be had, and it can be felt in the lyricism of the prose and the refined composition of many of the pictures, in framing such degradation, controlling it within the frame of a paragraph, picture and project, and especially in communicating it to others. One participant alone—Dima, aged six, who took the camera from her mother, refuses this intertwining of ugliness and beauty. She says of a portrait of her friend in front of a doorway:

This is a picture of my friend Nour in front of Nazaline and Aya's house... they are not here anymore... I don't want to talk about sad things, I don't want to say whose house this is, or where they went or why. If I do, the picture won't be beautiful.

This book so significant because it allows us some access into the minds of the conquered—to imagine what it would be like to have soldiers break into your house at night and threaten your children, or to have your name and contact details tattooed on your body so that relatives would be able to identify your mutilated corpse. In a telling indication of the high death rate of Iraqis, two of the handful of women who participated had died by the time the book was published. One was the brave Um-Mohammed.



We all live in the wake of this war, which had a large part to play in bringing about the current economic crisis. Trillions of dollars were spent to comprehensively wreck the lives of tens of millions of people. Iraq, still without effective government, still bombed

by fanatics and sectarians, still under effective occupation, is a nation whose citizens are still tortured daily, as this book so powerfully and unbearably describes. We are also all implicated in these crimes, especially in the lack of a strong and sustained opposition to the war, and that guilt should haunt our dreams until the guilty are brought to justice.

Philip Jones Griffiths spoke of photographing a Vietnamese boy who had asked him to take a picture of his half torn-away face. That picture, he said, could never be published but he had a utopian dream that one day it would be hung about the neck of Henry Kissinger at his war crimes' trial. Similarly, this book should hang about the necks of Bush, Rumsfeld, Cheney, Blair and the rest on their path to punishment.