Sarabad
Abdulkareem Kasid

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Translated from Arabic
by the author & Sara Halub,
with John Welch

Shearsman Books
Acknowledgements

My thanks to my daughter Sara for her help with translating my poems. I am grateful to David Kuhrt for the discussions I had with him concerning earlier versions of some of these translations. Particular thanks to him for the work he did on the sequence, ‘Windows’ – it is largely his version that is used here. My thanks to Kader Rabia whose French translation of ‘Cafés’ served as the basis for an initial English version of that sequence.

Poems from this collection have previously appeared in the following print and online magazines: Fire, Litter, Poetry London, The North, Intercapillary Space, Shadowtrain, Stand.

The sequences ‘Cafés’ and ‘Windows’ were published in CAFES by The Many Press in 2012.
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The Iraqi poet Abdulkareem Kasid is part of that Arab diaspora which, as I wrote when reviewing *Plague Lands*, a collection by another London-based Iraqi poet Fawzi Karim published by Carcanet, “carries on a rich and varied cultural life in this country but which only sporadically comes into more general view”. Born in Basra in 1946, Abdulkareem Kasid left Iraq in 1978 and escaped to Kuwait. To avoid being found there and sent back he left Kuwait and made his way to Yemen. He settled in Aden where he worked as an editor of the *New Yemeni Culture* magazine. Here he was living close to the house in which Rimbaud lived, appropriately enough as he has translated Rimbaud into Arabic. As well as Rimbaud, celebrated in this collection in his poem ‘Aden’s Volcano’, his translations from French into Arabic include *Paroles* by Jacques Prévert, *Anabase* by Saint-John Perse, and *Papiers* by Ritsos, working in this case from a French translation.

Well-known in the Arab world as a poet, essayist and translator, he has published more than forty books. A graduate in Philosophy from Damascus University, he lived and worked there from 1980 to 1990. He currently lives in London with his two grown-up children. In recent years he has returned to Iraq from time to time as well as travelling widely in North Africa and the Middle East.

His poetry first appeared in English in the *Anthology of Translated Arabic Poetry* (Columbia University Press, 1987), and in *Iraqi Poetry Today* (King’s College, London, 2003). In 2006 he worked on *A Soldier’s Tale*, a version of Stravinsky’s opera transposed to an Iraqi setting and performed at the Old Vic Theatre in London in 2006. He has been published in *Banipal*, the London-based journal that presents a wide range of Arabic literature, prose and poetry, in English translation. More recently translations of his work have been appearing in a variety of print and online journals in the U.K.
The initial translations of the poems in this collection were made by the poet jointly with his daughter Sara Halub, and over the past four years or so I have been able to work closely with the poet on those versions.

John Welch
The House of Poetry

In this ancient dwelling
My grandparents sleep.
This is the house of poetry.
In nearby fields
The grandchildren skip after sunbeams.
I lean back on the balcony
Overlooking the river.
I hear the hubbub and laugh
Ignore the snores of our ancestors.
Terminal Wisdom

How could I know
My outbound journey
Could be the way back,
That my dreams were behind me
And I was only the walking shadow
Of a standing-still man?
Underworld

I drop in on the underworld
Shivering. Among the dead
Are mine. Still children
They hover, noiseless
Above my shoulder.
Women weep without tears.
Soldiers suffocate
Choking on earth-stained
Winding sheets
Bones of loved ones,
My father, approaching
Hesitantly.
The dead crowd round.
I leave
Announcing my death,
Truth my shroud.
Boats

The boats at the quayside
Leave the bright lights behind them,
They are painted white by the mist.
In the dark of the night boats come and go,
Come and go in the soul’s darkness.
Between myself and the boats words
Murmur, a lighted
Cigarette fades,
The shadows are scattered, and
Ah! I can feel
A light breeze touching me now,
It carries me – a boat
Out of the mist.
The Shroud

My mother kept a shroud
Years after the war ended
Hidden in a box
Under the marriage bed.
In the night, while we slept,
She wore it – to greet my father
Who would return, thirsting.
She comforted him like a child.
They travelled with birds of paradise
But where did my mother go?
To which funeral, which mourning?
Where did she go, where?
The First Mourning

Day and night
Like travelling Bedouin
We pitch our tents
Outside our homes
Calling to all and sundry
Spread out on rugs, to the children
Left to graze like lambs.
Who has been taken –
Which house was theirs?
Do the grieving still come?
The blind orator
Is reciting his elegies,
The houses
Still blocked with coffins.
The Second Mourning

The dead come into their exile feet first,
Each wrapped in an army blanket.
Is it a neighbour
Or a relative?
Who is this sleeper, swaddled
As if he were still in the womb?
Is it Ahmed who comes, his family
Already unfolding his robes
For the wedding?
Ahmed returning, a groom
Seated between two companions
Suddenly he is surrounded
By wailing women beating their breasts.
No gunshot will waken him now –
Ahmed has moved on.