

Jalal Barzanji. *The Man in Blue Pyjamas* (University of Alberta Press, 2011)

‘For some reason I thought poets like me didn’t have to worry about the mundane aspects of everyday life’ (99).

With this statement Kurdish poet and PEN Writer-in-Exile Jalal Barzanji expresses a sentiment shared by poets and writers the world over. Only, for most of those poets and writers, the ‘mundane aspects of life’ do not include three years of unjust imprisonment, recurrent beatings, government censorship, and exile. The first autobiographical offering from Barzanji, *The Man in Blue Pyjamas*, is a memoir detailing not only the cruelty and brutality of the Ba’ath regime under Saddam Hussein, but the power and eventual triumph of the written word over censorship and ignorance.

Barzanji’s memoir begins with, of all things, an explanation of the pyjama-wearing customs of Kurdish men. He describes one chill evening in 1986 when he had opted to lounge in a pair of thin, blue pyjamas rather than his thicker white ones – a decision he would come to curse over the next three years – when the Iraqi secret police suddenly burst into his home. Torn from his family, friends, and his writing, Barzanji would spend the next three years in prison wearing those same blue pyjamas. His crime: writing nature poetry.

Part prison memoir, part meditation on the power of the written word, Barzanji’s account is at times evocative of Victor Frankl. Interspersed through it all is Barzanji’s love affair with writing:

I knew I had lost some weight because my pyjamas were very loose. I also was covered in rashes. I was desperate for a bath and for some good food. Imagine nothing else but bread and water every day. I had cramps in my stomach and was constantly constipated. But to be denied pen and paper was simply beyond endurance. I wanted a complete record of my imprisonment, but I was afraid I couldn’t rely entirely on memory. Pen and paper would’ve been my salvation. (22-3)

He presents his story in a disjointed narrative that continually jumps over geographic and chronologic boundaries. After discussing the morbid details of his imprisonment (beatings are common, disease is rampant, and the prison, once a library, is so packed the inmates are forced to sleep standing up), Barzanji jumps back to his childhood in the tiny village of Ashkaftsaqa. After a detailed account of his youth, the narrative then switches to Barzanji’s adolescence in the Kurdish city of Hawler. He recounts his years spent playing football, his education at a recently-opened teaching institute in Hawler, and trying his best to get on with daily life during an uneasy cease-fire between the Iraqi forces and the Kurdish freedom fighters, the *peshmerga*.

From there Barzanji dedicates a chapter to his love affair with the written word, describing to the reader his affinity for poetry and the herculean effort involved in getting his works out. His first collection of poems, *Dance of the Evening Snow*, would be rejected by government censors three times before meeting with approval. Barzanji explains,

There was no real reason for the rejection. My poems were non-political. They were an effort to create something different and beautiful. But that made little difference. Because the censors were so paranoid, they would reject whatever they were not familiar with. (119)

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The narrative then returns once more to Barzanji in prison. The details of his own misery are interspersed with retellings of the stories of some of his fellow prisoners and clandestine communications with his wife until suddenly, rather abruptly, his captors open the doors of the prison and the inmates are commanded to leave.

Still under government suspicion, Barzanji attempts to flee to Europe via Turkey. The remainder of the memoir deals with an ill-fated attempt to smuggle him into Greece, his subsequent exile in Turkey, and his eventual asylum in Canada as a political refugee.

The lack of coherence in the narrative leads to occasional difficulties in reading. Not only are the chapters desultory and scattered, but Barzanji is given to frequent tangential reminiscences – and even reminiscences within reminiscences – that sometimes destroy any semblance of a narrative thread. To his credit, Barzanji begins the memoir with an admission of disjointedness and the explanation ‘A human memory does not sort out pictures and stories in a chronological sequence, or in a straight line. We remember in sudden flashbacks, out of order’ (1), but the warning does little to help the reader follow along.

Despite this, *The Man in Blue Pyjamas* is a noteworthy accomplishment. Barzanji has created a poignant memoir brimming with authenticity and many readers, despite nationality, will find in him a kindred spirit. His openness and compassion make him an endearing figure – a tender man who wants nothing more than to embrace the world and memorialise it with words. His story serves as a chilling reminder of the dangers many writers still face simply by putting pen to paper.

Logan Mickel