

On a Small Bridge in Iraq

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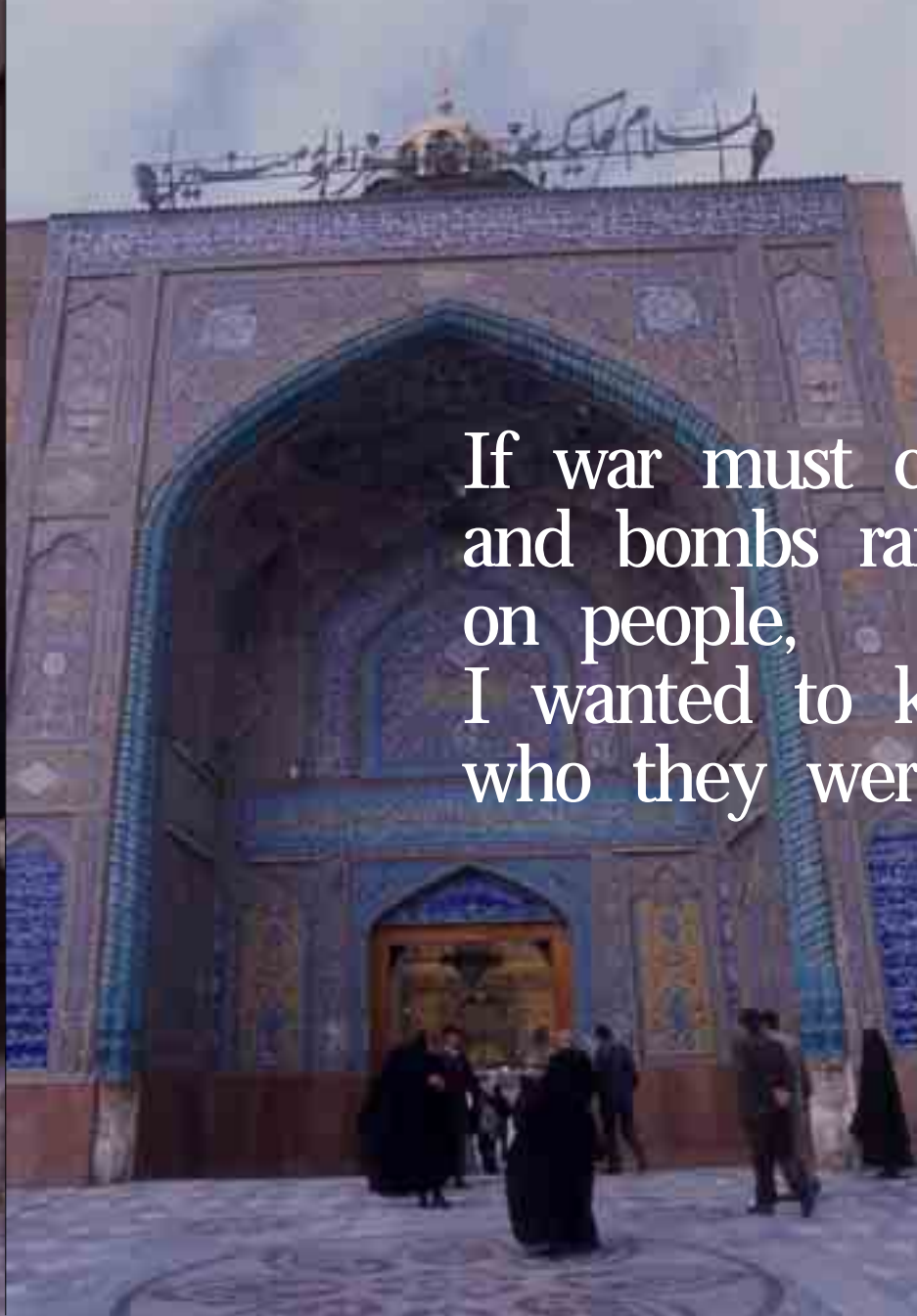
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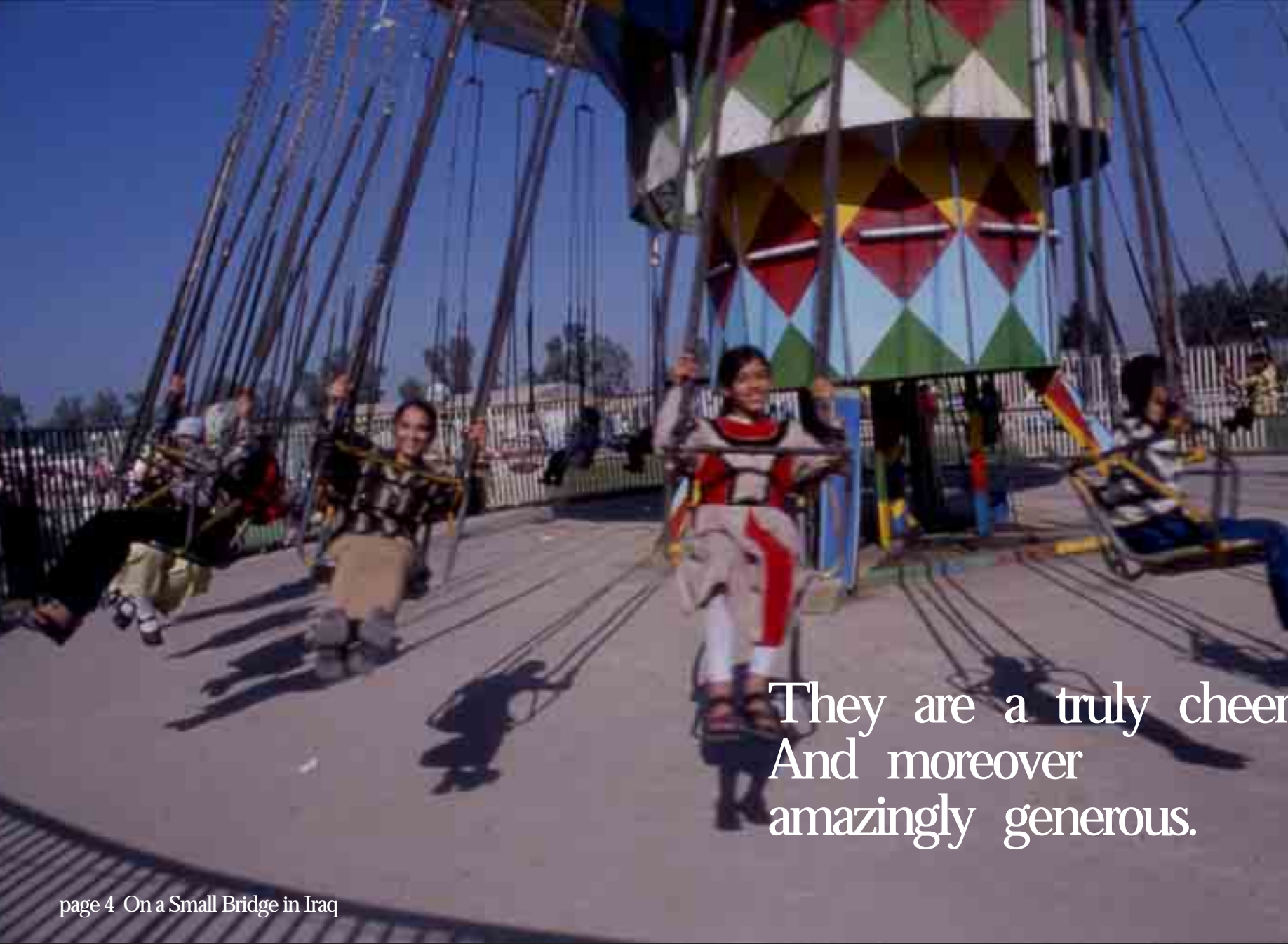
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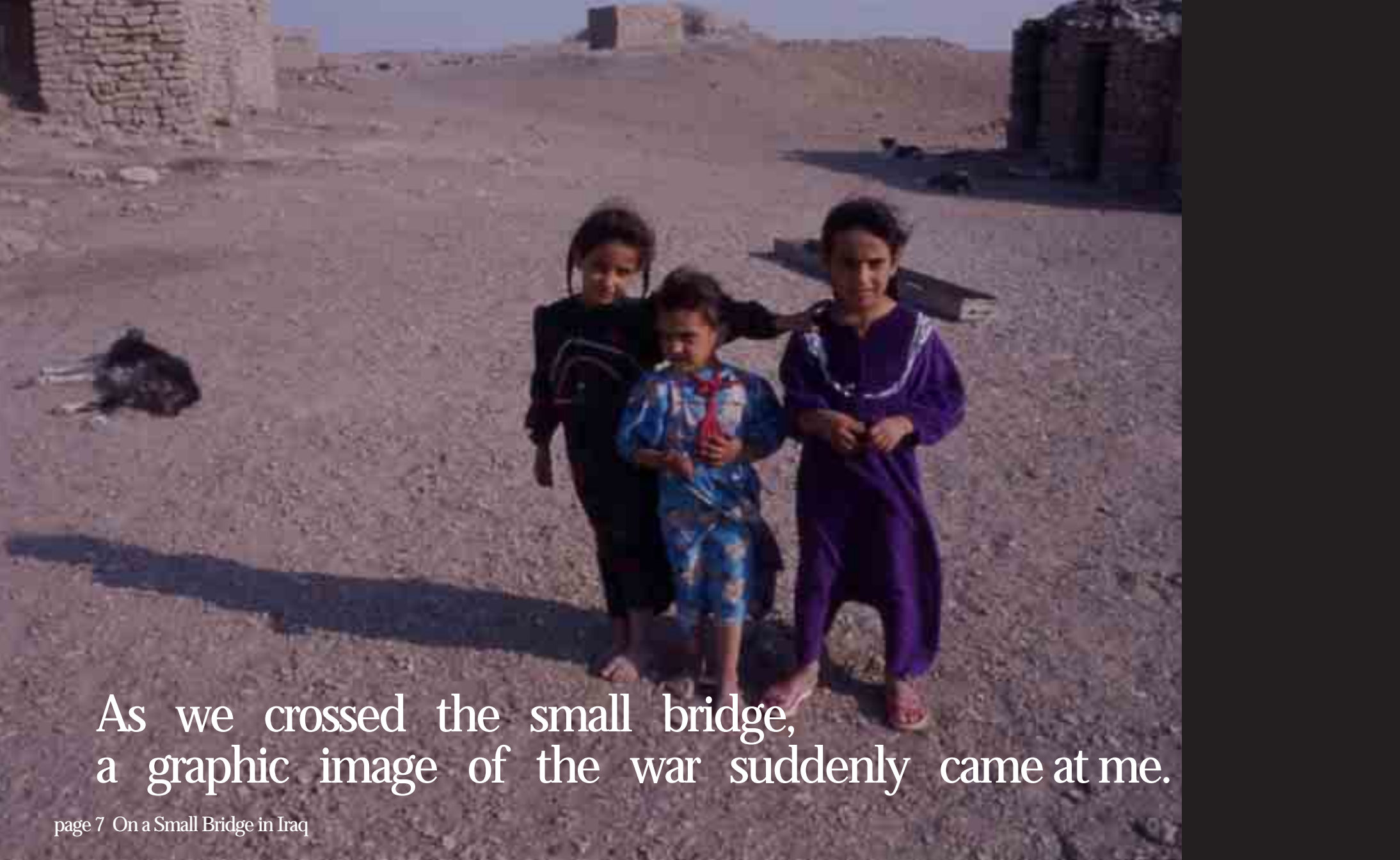
They are a truly cheerful people.
And moreover
amazingly generous.

An aerial photograph of a busy city street in Iraq. The street is filled with various vehicles, including a large white bus, several cars, and a truck. The buildings are multi-story and densely packed. The scene is captured from a high angle, showing the layout of the street and the surrounding urban environment.

It was readily apparent
that the country as a whole was just now
trying to get back in step with
where it was decades ago.



Food was abundant
and of impeccable quality.



As we crossed the small bridge,
a graphic image of the war suddenly came at me.

I couldn't think of
a single reason
why those children
should be killed
by American bombs.





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On a Small Bridge in Iraq

I thought I would go to Iraq.

My primary objective was to visit archaeological sites. Off and on for the last few years, I'd been serializing my views on human civilisations as seen from their ruins and artefacts in a popular Japanese magazine, which took me all over the globe looking at various different sites. Obviously Mesopotamia ought to have been among these, but I'd been forced to exclude it.

Mesopotamia, of course, ranks as one of the four great cradles of civilisation, a region now part of the modern country known as Iraq. Once there, the ruins of Sumer, Assyria and Babylonia are all to be seen, the problem was that present-day Iraq is largely inaccessible. Since the Gulf War, the country has basically shut out foreign visitors and obtaining a visa has become extremely difficult. There is no Lonely Planet Iraq guidebook; the Middle East volume offers some scant

coverage, but warns that getting into the country is tricky. Enough to discourage anyone.

This past May, however, I got word that it really wasn't as difficult as all that. Things had changed over the last couple of years. Whereupon I went to the Iraqi Embassy in Tokyo, explained the gist of my magazine reportage work, and was promptly okayed to be issued a visa.

Over the summer months I had lecture engagements in Europe, which took me through to the autumn, so I picked up my Iraq visa in Paris (valid for only three months, hence a visa issued in Tokyo would have already expired). It was the end of October before I actually found myself en route to Iraq, arriving in Bagdad the evening of 29 October.

Yet archaeological interest or no, now was hardly the best time to be visiting Iraq. US government proclamations made it sound as if they might invade the very next day, and I had no idea what was going on inside the country. The latest 2002 guidebook published in England painted a bleak picture: the populace was suffering under the Saddam Hussein regime, food was scarce due to the economic embargo, international telephone calls were next to impossible.

Considering the possibility of war, now was perhaps not



the best time to be sight-seeing Iraq, yet in fact it made me all the more curious to see this country that was to be targeted by missiles and bombs.

Newspapers and television covered the international issues in great detail. Most of which seemed to consist of negotiations between various powers and the United Nations; little mention was made of the ordinary people whose fate hung in the balance. Effectively, the newspapers were merely trade organs for self-proclaimed specialists in international relations; it was virtually impossible to understand from such media the realities of war for the general populace.

I had followed the news ever since the attack on Afghanistan the previous autumn, but often had to wonder what I thought I was doing? I was no politician, nor a diplomat, nor an oil magnate. Neither, of course, was I a soldier or a freedom fighter. I was simply an ordinary Japanese very far removed from the conflict.

Not that I was unaware of my very privileged life in a major oil-consuming nation thanks to the global economy. As much as I might question this globalism that increasingly widens the gap between rich and poor, I wasn't about to go live outside the system on a desert island. I had written my criticisms of the militarily-backed American political-economic hegemony, and

there was little more I could do.

Yet even so, I could imagine. In late 2001, I could hypothesize: what if I had been born in Afghanistan? Even if I weren't among the Taliban junta but simply an average citizen, I would have been bombed.

Thinking about Iraq, if war must come and bombs rain down on people, I wanted to know who they were. And if the media didn't deem to show me, then I would go find out for myself.

I arrived in Bagdad late at night and went out to walk around early the following morning. The place seemed very easy-going; walk the streets, and there are not the least sense of tension or apprehension that war might come any day. No visible soldiers or military vehicles, no sandbags piled up alongside the roads, no air raid drill sirens. The business districts were bustling just like in any other country.

For almost two weeks, I travelled around Iraq, from Mosul in the north to Nasiriyah in the south. I have my own ways for getting to know a country; I pay close attention to the food. The nation-state system rests upon the foundations of the life of its inhabitants. There must be safety and sufficient food for young couples to feel secure enough to raise offspring. Children must



have room to grow, the elderly leisure and tranquillity. People have to be able to say what they want to say and go where they want to go. The very first function of a state is to guarantee these things. Among these quanta, one of the easiest to gauge is the food people normally eat in the towns. The quantity and quality, there's no disguising that.

In the case of Japan, despite our lack of self-sufficiency, there is food aplenty. Quality, however, is a different matter. The most obvious example is the vegetables sold in Japanese supermarkets: beautiful in appearance, barely any taste at all. And if we look at American culture in terms of its fast food, the overriding principle seems to be to take otherwise flavourless ingredients and forcing some kind of taste into them by means of additives. The joys of eating are in violation of consumerism.

Measured by the same yardstick, Iraq was opulent. Food was abundant and of impeccable quality. Invariably, service in Iraqi restaurants follows one set pattern: even before the customer has time to order, a spread of various appetisers is laid out on the table. Lentil soup, chopped cucumber and tomato salad, two kinds of macaroni salad (yoghurt dressing and tomato dressing), chickpea salad, sesame tahini, aubergines and other vegetables sautéed in garlic. The plates are so big, they practically edge off the table. An additional



plate of salt-cured black olives and cucumber pickles is also standard fare. Ten whole large cucumbers or so, and if that's not enough, they'll bring more. These are eaten together with a round flat bread while waiting for the main dish to arrive. This again is generous. A typical vegetable dish might be aubergines and beans and potatoes simmered in tomato sauce. An order of roast chicken would bring half a bird per person. Or else lamb stewed in tomato. Or kebabs of cubed or ground meat. All of which come with a plate of rice.

Everywhere I went I ate well and was always served more than I could eat. Nothing fancy, mind you, but even in roadside truckstops and provincial foodhalls everything was good. Never letting one's guests go away hungry is a paradigm of Arab hospitality, a tradition that informs even the most simple eateries. Which no doubt is why many of the men tend to develop paunches, though not unbecoming.

As far as eating is concerned, Iraq passes the nation-state test with flying colours. Although I should add that the worst meals I had were at a high-class hotel and a tourist-trade restaurant in Bagdad, the capital.

The food shortage, I was told, was worst from 1992 to 1994. After the Gulf War, at the instigation of the US and UK,



the United Nations enacted a trade embargo in the name of economic sanctions. An oil-rich country, Iraq was originally able to buy whatever it wanted until imports were restricted. In 1991, however, oil production dropped to 15% of the norm, leaving the domestic economy paralysed.

Aside from food, shortages of imported medical supplies had grave impact, causing a reported five fold rise in infant mortality. Without antibiotics, normally inconsequential lung infections easily became fatal.

In 2001, the UN published findings of an estimated 1.5 million deaths caused by the embargo. Among whom 620 thousand were children under the age of five. I recalled reports of how US missiles targeting a pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum caused large mortalities from very common illnesses in Sudan. Bombs aren't the only things that kill people.

The embargo was total. Books and magazines, stationery, coffins, lightbulbs, shoes, toys, even wheelbarrows were on the restricted list. Even today it is illegal for British subjects to post medicine to friends in Iraq without obtaining special export permits from the Ministry of Trade, which apparently is virtually impossible.

Through the worst of it, the Iraqi people worked as hard as they humanly could. In 1985, an educated profession was

salaried at the equivalent of \$2000 a month; during the embargo, that fell to \$3. School teachers drove taxis to make ends meet. Everyone was living hand-to-mouth and sound values went by the wayside, so elders now bemoan that kids who grew up in those years have no sense of direction or goals.

When everything ground to a halt for years, the economic sanctions, they say, stole their future. Scientific journals were barred, putting a serious dent in the country's intellectual progress. External restrictions made it an isolationist state.

When worldwide outrage at the inhumanity of these measures came to a head in 1996, the sanctions were relaxed to allow oil to be exchanged for food. Machinery, automobiles and computers, however, barely trickled into the country. Travelling around, it was readily apparent that the country as a whole was just now trying to get back in step with where it was decades ago. Hotel elevators were antiquated and in poor maintenance, some in such bad condition I thought I'd be trapped between floors. Automobiles were in even worse shape; many amazed me that they even could run. Taxis had broken windscreens and doors that could only be opened from the inside. And because all the cars predated emission standards, the centre of Bagdad was choked with exhaust

fumes.

Not only were the cars old, they were extremely limited in variety, perhaps due to government import programmes. By and large, most were Brazil-manufactured Volkswagens; although there were a few old Soviet-made Moscovitches. Not that new vehicles were entirely absent; the occasional new Chinese double-decker bus was also to be seen in Bagdad. But overall the cars were noticeably older than in the equally busy streets of Amman in neighbouring Jordan (the variety and quality of household wares in the shops of both cities are otherwise comparable--that level of goods seemed to be coming in plentifully enough.)

What about the feeling in the streets? Newspapers throughout the world write about Iraq, uniformly about the inspections and when the war might begin, all of which led me to imagine that the whole country would be busily readying for the coming conflict.

Likewise, given all the news about citizens cowing under the violent dictatorial regime of Sadam Hussein and his Ba'athist Party, a society of mutual surveillance and secret informants, I half-expected the whole place to feel chillingly tense, people hesitating to even be seen talking to a foreigner.

In actual fact, I encountered nothing of the kind. They were the ones who came up and talked to me. In imperfect English, they'd bid me welcome to Iraq and shake my hand, ask where I'd come from, tell me Iraq's a nice place, isn't it? They'd tell me their names, they'd ask my name. Apparently the study of English is encouraged. I got into a conversation with one computer engineering student from Mosul University who spoke fluent English and finally even promised to keep up a correspondence with me.

Whether just being friendly or simply unintimidated, they are a truly cheerful people. And moreover amazingly generous. And this was after coming through the Iran-Iraq War, the hardships during the embargo, and now mounting prospects for the next war. As I saw it, they freely greeted colleagues and strangers alike, and would eagerly begin friendly chatting. Thresholds between people were minimal. On the streets of Bagdad I noticed none of the cold standoffishness one sees in Tokyo, and in the provincial cities people were even more open. In a word, the whole country might be said to be simple peasant folk, which is a good thing by me.

Where were the women?

Whether or not women are seen out in society is regarded



as an indicator of how modernised the country is. Call it a Western prejudice. But as I come from the nominally Westernised country of Japan, let me apply this standard.

There were plenty of women to be seen on the streets, and not hiding their faces as in Saudi Arabia or wearing scarves as in Iran (where literally without exception every girl over the age of seven or eight covered her hair). To be accurate, I did see a few women with veiled faces in the south, and perhaps half covered their hair, but a full eighty percent of the coeds at Mosul University did not cover their hair at all.

In the bustling market of Nasiriyah, maybe forty percent of the shoppers and thirty percent of the shopkeepers were women, all happily going about their business. There seems to be no rule about women not going outside. Many officials were women. There is section in the Ministry of Information that publishes an English daily newspaper, and the entire editorial staff from the chief editor on down were women. Quite a difference to a country like Saudi Arabia where women are not even allowed to drive cars.

Not a few women wore the traditional black abaya robe; some half the women in the Nasiriyah market were in black. Clothing in general is conservative. It takes courage to break with tradition and wear something new. Very probably, Iraqi



women are in the course of changing their attire, as the more urbanised, younger generations are already tending toward Westernised dress.

Attire and other cultural hallmarks of a particular country or people is not something, I think, for persons outside that culture to point fingers at. In the case of Japan or the West, the values associated with following ever-changing fashions are just too confusing, and above all exceedingly wasteful. Personal preference has become eroded by the logic of capital.

Iraqi women are out in society, but in the home, they stay apart. During my stay in Iraq, I was invited into three private homes where I was given magnanimous receptions, but in none of these houses did I meet a woman.

Which is why homes have a guest room separate from the living room. Whether in Bagdad or on the banks of the Euphrates or at the ruins of Uruk, it was the boy of the house who brought the tea to the guest room. Even when it came time for us to take a souvenir snapshot of the whole family by way of thanks, it was strictly the males of the household who lined up in front of the doorway. We could hear women's voices giggling and talking in the back, but they themselves never came out.

Outside the homes another story. Women harvesting rice

alongside the road south from Najaf cheerfully allowed their pictures to be taken. Young girls in Nasiriyah market hesitated, but clearly were enticed by the idea of being photographed. At home, however, different standards hold; the patriarchal system is staunchly in place.

As a footnote to the conservatism of costume, I should note that a bride I happened to see in Nasiriyah wore a white Western wedding dress. In the summer while in the Turkish countryside, I saw a similar spectacle; no matter how conservative the society, it seems the women want to embrace distant Western culture at least once in their lives, when they marry.

As often as news of negotiations toward security inspections filtered in, the city of Bagdad was singularly tranquil. When I went to the Ministry of Information, the government agency in charge of news, not once in walking off the street up to an office on the eighth floor did anyone move to stop me (I'd asked directions over the phone beforehand).

We travelled a total of 1600 kms north and south in order to visit the various archaeological sites, passing through numerous checkpoints, but never were we actually questioned. Likewise with taking photographs, we were only told "no



photos" at a military base right next to the site of Uruk and again at a VIP guesthouse facility beside the ruins of Babylon.

Just to set the record straight, we planned this research trip ourselves; we decided where to go, what to see, whom to talk to, everything. We were given journalist visas, so an interpreter from the Ministry of Information accompanied us, but he also made all the arrangements for visits, made very apt suggestions about what to see, and was generally very helpful. I'm sure that part of his duties was to keep tabs on us, but it was all very loose. Say I went to a museum in the morning and returned to my hotel in the early afternoon and told him "That's all for today," he would go away, leaving us completely unwatched for the rest of the day. I myself didn't have sufficient local contacts or journalistic pluck to make use of such opportunities to go meet with opposition activists, but it would have been easy enough to step out of the hotel and hail a taxi.

Iraqi government newspapers (English and Arabic) did report goings-on at the UN and antiwar demonstrations in other countries. Of course, the Iraqi government's editorial bias was very clear, and there was no freedom of the press. Although for some reason, in addition to the two state-run channels, the hotel TV also showed Discovery Channel. Admittedly poor showing compared to Amman, where one could watch BBC,



CNN, German DW, French TV5, Italian RAI, and Al Jazeera, not to mention Saudi, Egyptian and Iraqi broadcasts.

As Western media tells it, President Saddam Hussein and his Ba'athist Party rule by oppression. I will abstain from passing judgment on that one. I don't speak Arabic, nor is there any way I can claim much insight into the realities of life from a mere two week stay. Compared with Hitler's Germany or World War II Japan or Soviet Russia under Stalin or even America during the McCarthy years, not to mention present-day North Korea or Saudi, I have no way of knowing whether Iraqi society is as oppressive or not.

I do, however, know one thing: this past autumn the President of Iraq did receive a vote of national support. The published figure was 100% in support of Saddam Hussein, a result that Western media ridiculed as proof of autocracy. I asked an Iraqi intellectual I got to know what he made of all this (just for the record, the Ministry of Information interpreter wasn't there), and he thought a good part of the Iraqis were against the Saddam Hussein regime, but as America was about to launch a war on them, now was not the time to be changing leaders. The people have their pride, and if you threaten them with weapons they'll snap back. The 100% figure, he thought, probably reflected such popular sentiments.

Different media use different yardsticks. Media in the industrialised world always seem to view the developing countries subtractively, by how much they fall short or don't measure up. When they hear a 100% vote of confidence, all they can think is that the balloting was coerced.

I will not deny that there is no freedom of speech in Iraq. And it's probably true that Hussein and his Ba'athist Party maintain their regime through purges and repression. If respect for minority views is a basic democratic principle, then Iraq is not a democracy. That, however, is a question for the Iraqi people, not something for foreign powers to set right by use of military force. To condemn Saddam Hussein's government while recognising the feudalistic Saudi regime or Israel that violates the rights of its own ethnic Arab citizens is hypocritical.

Western news about Iraq completely ignores the critical factor of nationalism. I believe many Iraqis have risked showing their support for Saddam Hussein, not because they were pressured to do so, but because they earnestly seek to overcome the current crises. And we must respect the people's judgment.

I personally do not like nationalism. Such thinking might well serve the cause of national cohesion, but it frequently becomes overly emotional and prevents calm, rational

decision-making. It meaninglessly fans the fires of animosity. Though at times when external elements threaten to break up the state, the mechanism of nationalism can be seen to increase a people's unity and powers of resistance. Bush's made a popular comeback out of September 11; the North Korean abduction issue saved Japan's Prime Minister Koizumi.

When times were tight due to economic sanctions, the Iraqi people looked for the cause to their suffering and readily found one in the actions of America and the rest of the West. Sixty thousand mothers who could merely look on as their babies died in their arms while imports of antibiotics were halted are going to hate America, not their own President. The economic sanctions served to galvanise the Iraqi people and strengthen the position of their statesmen. The West's strategy backfired.

Saddam Hussein has not held on to power this long because of repression alone. Good or bad, he is an excellent politician. On not one, but two counts: one, he has an ideology for guiding Iraq through whatever international straits; and two, he has the leadership skills and power base to wield that ideology for the Iraqi people. In the former instance, he takes after Nasser, rejecting Western influences while striving to shape a modern Arab state; toward the latter, tracing Nasser's

ultimate failure to his inability to cultivate capable bureaucrats, he has strengthened his Ba'athist Party.

Another necessary quality for a politician, as is well known, is charisma. His portrait is displayed throughout the country; he regularly appears in the newspaper and on television. His portraits come in many different guises--the smiling benevolent father, the Westernised gentleman, the Arab warrior--all pitted against the cowboy hero Bush, a risible pairing. His media manipulation strategies are clearly lessons in celebrity learned from the West.

This is the Saddam Hussein that most citizens support, hardly justification for targeting them with bombs and missiles.

Conversely, looking from the vantage point of what America stands to gain or lose makes it all very clear. Two things move America here: the securing of energy resources in the Middle East and the survival of Israel. Which explains why, when the Ayatollah Khomeini came on the scene in Iran, America was so eager to incite Iraq into toppling Iran. Yet an over powerful Iraq was also a problem, so it attempted to destroy the Hussein regime during the Gulf War and now is using "weapons of mass destruction" as an excuse to launch military force against him. Everyone knows that Israel has nuclear weapons, yet no one in the West--not even Japan--tries



to follow up that argument. And while all this is going on, another million Iraqis stand to be killed.

My intellectual Iraqi acquaintance mentioned to me, a foreigner, that Saddam Hussein had made two big mistakes. One was the Iran-Iraq War, where he was simply used as a front line foot soldier for the West. The other was the Gulf War, where he allowed himself to be lured into a trap.

Speaking from his own experience, the most important formative decade or so of his life was lost to war and embargo. If not for which, he might have been a different person. Not that this is what made him decry the prospect of yet another war, but after how many more decades will we finally see America's hawks out of power and a peaceful Iraq? If they can genuinely promise a little better world for our children's generation, he said, then fine.

Listening to all such talk only made me aware how decisively the ravages of war can cripple the abilities of so many. There are many handicaps that might bear upon one's life, but the majority of today's Japanese can scarcely begin to imagine the kind of handicap that international politics and war can bring.

So, then, what reality does the prospect of war have for



the Iraqis? Why did Bagdad and the other provincial cities seem so tranquil? It's not that they're unprepared for war. From three months back, the government began doubling food rations and encouraging each household to stockpile. If war comes, America's strike force will be overwhelming. Iraq has no command of the air; their anti-aircraft firepower is inconsequential. The place, quite frankly, is a sitting target.

Hence, considering supply routes may be disrupted making food distribution impossible, they've started distributing early. What about water? There's no way to store up that much water. If water works are destroyed, how will city dwellers get water? How will the society function without infrastructure? What percentage of the population will be lost?

The embargo alone killed children, and criticism has been levelled against such genocide in the guise of sanctions. War, however, is much more direct destruction. During the Gulf War, the US used several tonnes of depleted uranium, and in the south of Iraq there are many children and adults who now suffer from radiation sickness. Which in a sense makes it the first atomic conflict since Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In the event of war, evacuation is meaningless since you would not know where you go or what would happen there, some said. Better for neighbours to come to each other's aid.



And considering the warmth with which people embrace one another in Iraqi society, I couldn't help but feel that those words carried a deep significance.

Some 400 kms north of Bagdad in the city of Mosul I ran into, of all things, an American tour group. While the present Iraqi government has little enthusiasm for tourism, putting more stock in selling petroleum for foreign currency, groups of five or more can get entry to see the sites. Still, Americans were unexpected--a dozen or so pensioners, probably avid archaeology buffs.

I asked their guide about them. They'd been there for eight days, travelling around from Basrah in the far south to Mosul in the north, and were heading overland that day for Syria, and ultimately flying home from Lebanon. When I expressed my surprise at Americans coming to Iraq at a time like this, he told me they'd come in overland from Iran, but one man panicked at the border crossing. Fortunately, three others had already been to Iraq before and convinced him that Iraq was not a terrifying at all, so happily all members entered the country and the hesitant man thoroughly enjoyed himself seeing the archaeological sites.

I wonder what impressions of the country they took home



with them to tell their friends. Very likely there was some ban of US citizens visiting Iraq. Did they have to pay some fine or face possible imprisonment? In actual practice, however, I've heard that no one has actually been tried under the ban.

I also met a French tour group at Ur. It seems that I wasn't the only one for whom the attractions of ancient culture outweighed the dangers of war.

Something strange happened on the way back to the capital after spending a night in Nasiriyah in the south where I went to see the ruins of Ur. Suddenly, only a few score metres off the motorway, a land-to-air missile was fired, making a tremendous roar and leaving a trail of white smoke as it shot up across the sky and disappeared. There was no explosion, so apparently it didn't hit anything. I didn't see any airplanes flying overhead, but that was only what I could see from the small window of moving car. We didn't stop to get out and look. If they'd just fired a missile from here, then a counter-attack missile might well have been sailing back towards us. We didn't want to wait around and find out, so we drove out of there as fast as we could.

Why would they have fired a missile? Was it merely practice, an empty gesture? Or was it a perilous act, baiting

enemy counter-fire?

The place was near the town of Shatrah, within the No Fly Zone arbitrarily established by the Americans and British. Since 1991, US and UK bombs and missiles have pummeled this area comprising over half the national territory. By 1999 data, six thousand sorties had resulted in 450 strikes on target facilities. Add to this some 22 thousand personnel who manning 200 military planes and 19 ships. A top US officer went as far as to say they'd wiped out every last military installation; they'd even destroyed their outhouses. All of which means the war started a long while back, a completely unilateral war.

Most of Iraq is desert. Not the sand dune kind like the Sahara, but completely flat. We travelled the whole country from north to south, but all we ever saw was a level horizon line. No mountains. No valleys. In this age when everything is in plain view of surveillance satellites, in a country with no command of its own air space, where US and UK planes can fly wherever they like, if there's no mountainous terrain to dig fortresses, then where are they supposed to be hiding their weapons? (I'm not talking about the so-called "weapons of mass destruction".)

We passed by Iraqi military bases any number of times,



but as far as I could see from the outside they looked deserted. I once saw a tank moving, but even to my amateur eye it seemed terribly outdated. Probably that missile was just as old. Point the thing anywhere and fire as a symbolic, if pathetic act of defiance.

If a real war does come, Iraq will probably crumble without much counter-attack. How many "facilities" and "installations" will be destroyed? How many people will have to die before the war is over? As if anyone will even be left to declare the end of it.

As much as I saw of the country and the people in towns and villages, today's Iraq is an ordinary country. I've visited Iran, Jordan, Israel, Egypt and Turkey in the Middle East, and the atmosphere on the road in Iraq differs very little. Which is not to say some things about Iraqi society wouldn't puzzle visitors from abroad. The only banknote is the Saddam Hussein-faced 250 dinar bill, worth about 16 yen. Exchange 20 dollars and you get 136 bills--100 in a bundle, plus 36 loose.

The taxis have no meters. Every fare must be haggled. The very shortest trip in an incredibly ramshackle car driven by someone who speaks no English will cost 500 dinars--two bills. For the same distance in a little better car lined up in the rank



by a hotel frequented by foreigners, an English-speaking driver will demand twelve bills. The day after I arrived in Bagdad, I gave up on trying to count of amounts in dinars and simply kept track of the number of bills.

The whole country is on that level, so you see people hefting huge wads of bills to market. Carefully count out 47 bills, the other person won't even bother to count. Bundles of hundreds bear bank-issued bands, each bundle circulating as the equivalent of a 25,000 dinar note. The foreign visitor might expect there would be 5000 and 10,000 dinar bills as well, but no.

That much said, prices are cheap. Especially to a foreigner, amazingly cheap. A wonderful meal in a restaurant such as I've described might cost six to eight bills--about a dollar. Approximately the going rate forty years ago in Japan. A very healthy-looking chicken also sells in the market for about a dollar. A meaningless figure in terms of the average local income, still food and other goods are not out of everyone's reach overall. It seemed that anyone could buy a chicken if they really felt like it.

It's hard for me to know how strict censorship is in Iraq. My one and only experience was when I sent a fax from my hotel, I



had to present one copy of the fax to the hotel. Purely for their records and no other purpose, or so the disclaimer on the receipt assured me. While it is entertaining to imagine some secret police investigator trying to decipher my poor handwriting in Japanese to my wife, doubtlessly it would never actually come to that. If and only if by some fluke I were discovered to be an opposition agent would that copy have any great significance worth investigating.

In a bookstore I came across a book on the life and thoughts of Osama bin Laden. It was in Arabic, but the face on the cover was easy enough to identify. When I asked the Ministry of Information interpreter, he told me that almost any book could be freely sold in Iraq (though I sincerely doubt anything titled 'Crime and Punishment of Saddam Hussein' would make it to the bookstalls.)

The Iraqi government has strongly condemned Osama bin Laden. America's claims of connections between Al-Qaeda and the Iraqi government, they say, are wholly unfounded. Many Arab countries recognise and condone the activities of the Islamic guerrilla faction Mujahidin, but not Iraq. Perhaps out of a sense of apprehension that if they did accept Mujahidin, someday they might unleash their subversions against the Iraqi regime as well.



To put it succinctly, any and all who would attack the national order are enemies of Saddam Hussein. Which explains why they have routed the otherwise Islamic Chechen independence movement and supported a strong-armed Russia.

And yet they don't ban the sale of quotations from Osama bin Laden. Just what the spin the book puts on the man I have no idea, but given his popularity throughout the Arab world, no matter how critical it might well win over new adherents. Does this show a modicum of tacit favour? Or is the present government simply so very confident about domestic politics?

As an ordinary tourist, I could of course only see everyday things, yet the everyday goings-on of the Iraqi people left me with a strong impression. The very idea of dropping bombs on these people struck me as incomprehensible.

In a western district of Bagdad known as Mutanabbi, the name of a tenth century poet, they hold book fairs on holidays. Both sides of the narrow streets as well as the pavements are lined with books. Shoppers stroll about checking out the merchandise, picking up interesting-looking finds, and bargaining.

I went around looking at my leisure, thinking that book

lovers in any country are the same. In the Arab world, I'm told, there's a saying that Egyptians write the books, Lebanese do the printing, and Iraqis buy and read them. For a fact, the people gathered there seemed to be voracious readers. Naturally almost all the books without exception were in Arabic, but I did see some provocative book covers. Novels, most likely. What few English books I saw were university level textbooks, with Shakespeare, Dickens and Faulkner thrown in for good measure.

I did, however, find a Japanese book at the book fair. Written by one Hidehiko Takahashi, a memoir of a sojourn in Iraq published in Japan some twenty years ago. Fairly detailed on Iraqi life and archaeology and culture, it seemed like something I could make immediate use of, so I didn't haggle very much. The function of such a booksellers' market is to get the right books into the hands of the persons who really want them. Someone who read Japanese left that book behind in this city, and the market delivered it right to me.

I feel a certain sense of cultural rapport with the Iraqis.

Another instance: at an ancient site in the north called Hatra, there was an old stonemason patiently levelling the face of a stone slab to be used in the far-reaching restoration

efforts. He'd chip away a bit, then rub his hand lovingly over the surface seeking out telltale rises and falls, then once again carefully position his chisel. There was not a trace of the imminent onslaught in his eyes. What he was seeing was how the site would look ten years, a hundred years hence. The Iraqis have many reasons to be proud, one of them being that they created one of the oldest civilisations on earth.

The old stonemason didn't say anything, but the sight of him treading in the footsteps of the ages was beautifully solemn. There might be countries in the world steadily marching toward war, but there are also countries that quietly went on restoring their ruins.

On the motorway leaving the ruins, we crossed a small bridge. Hatra was a trading city whose Arab inhabitants were strongly influenced by Hellenism. Situated in the middle of the desert, the city flourished thanks to the presence of several sources of water, one of them a small stream. Although in this season, it was a bone dry river bed spanned by the bridge.

As we crossed the small bridge, a graphic image of the war suddenly came at me. At that very moment in the afternoon of 4 November 2002, in the hangars of an American base in a nearby country or on an aircraft carrier on the sea, a cruise missile was standing by, readied with these coordinates.

In the not-too-distant future, it would come flying out of the clear blue sky, straight down toward this bridge, explode and destroy it. I could see it all too vividly. The bridge before my eyes was in flames, reduced to sand and ash.

Countless other missiles inscribed with the coordinates for the bridges and municipal offices, petroleum refineries and electrical power stations in every city throughout Iraq are all awaiting their turn. Their infrastructure utterly crushed in the Gulf War, then further crippled by economic sanctions, the Iraqi people laboured little by little on their own to rebuild--and now that too is to be destroyed in the next war.

Moreover, people will die. Some will be killed instantly by bombs and missiles, others will die slowly from lack of food or water or medicine. War makes no exceptions for children or women or the elderly. If war comes, they'll all get the worst of it.

Those firing the missiles definitely do not consider the after-effects. They're soldiers, trained not to picture the horror in their mind's eye. Military technologies have advanced enormously in the last twenty years, satellite surveillance and computer control have changed the very face of warfare--or rather, they have rendered it faceless. No longer does anyone actually see the enemy; the new technologies make it possible to kill without any feelings of guilt.





Seen from the American side, the missiles will hit Structure 3347HG and Trestle 4490BB, completely abstract assignments, not a young mother named Miriam. She, however, will die--Miriam and her three children, her young soldier cousin Yusef, and her farmer father Abdul.

The American soldiers firing the missiles don't think about the lives of Miriam and her family. They don't even want to imagine themselves as utterly disaffected executioners, or know how cold-blooded their callous disconcern makes them, or how this 100% random unilateral slaughter might be the result of a 100% misjudgement. I, however, who met them, saw their smiling faces in the market, ate tomatoes grown by their hands, cannot help but imagine their deaths.

I went to two mosques in Bagdad. One, at a place called Kadhimain, a sacred Shiah site visited by pilgrims from as far away as Iran. There are several other such sacred Shiah sites throughout Iraq, and a pilgrimage around to all of them is second only to a hajj to Mecca. All those I met the vicinity of this mosque seemed very contented, quite movingly so. Many brought their whole families, but none bickered or showed signs of fatigue; they all wore satisfied expressions, making it clear just how happy they were to be able to be making the

pilgrimage. Their faith was joyous.

The other mosque was called the 'Mother of Battles', and was highly political in character. Friday noontime at the beginning of Ramadan, the place was overflowing with those assembled to hear the preaching. I, of course, could not understand the sermon in Arabic, but the overblown tones of patriotic fervour were only too discernible. And the fact that it was being televised nationwide surely signified it agreed with government directives.

What struck me were the expressions of the men silently listening to the sermon with downturned eyes. Here was a mosque, not a political assembly hall, so no one spoke a word. Only the occasional muttering of prayers. under their breath. What could they have possibly been thinking, what was it that read on their faces while listening to such religious agitation?

Theirs were extremely pensive expressions. Were they being pumped with righteous indignation and desire to fight? Were they reliving these past twenty years of warfare and sanctions? Were the younger ones among them steeling their will to fight? Or trying to hold back anxieties about the death and disfigurement that await them?

When the one-hour sermon ended, the thousands in attendance stood up without a word and solemnly headed off.

From the autumn of 2001, the New York Times ran a column detailing the lives of each and every victim of the attack on the World Trade Center. Whether by terrorism or by war, each person who dies is an individual with family and friends. Which is why the stance of seeing terrorism from the perspective of the victims, from the viewpoint of everyone killed is so important. Yet the same newspaper only reported the war in Afghanistan in abstract figures. However far the striking range of American missiles, the eyes of the media never reached the battlefield. And if there is no view from the ground where the bombs hit, if they don't even go there to see, if media merely stress the misfortunes that befall one's own side, then how can those media be trusted?

Which is why I thought to go to Iraq to see for myself. In Bagdad, in Mosul, in small towns whose names I didn't even catch, I saw how the people lived. I ate their food, I talked with them, I watched as they cuddled their babies. I saw kids running around shouting. And I couldn't think of a single reason why those children should be killed by American bombs.

There are many scenes I remembered after returning to Japan. Kids were playing outside the ruins of Nineveh. I stopped to look at them before getting back in the car. Aged maybe eight to twelve with dirty faces and threadbare clothes,

but eyes shining, they were singing--a song I knew very well. What was that melody? I took three steps forward, humming along with them. The kids took notice. Hey, that foreigner guy knows this song!

I crouched down to their eye level. The children drew closer, singing their song. We sang that simple refrain together three times, then afterwards the oldest girl looked at me and grinned. That's when I remembered: it was a French nursery rhyme Frère Jacques, a melody known by heart the world over.

Inevitably, war can only squelch these children's songs under air raid sirens and change their timid smiles into grimaces of fear.

I know of no rationale to justify that.

Postscript

It's now seven weeks since I got back from Iraq. Ramadan began the day of the new moon I saw in Mosul and ended with the following new moon; the full moon I saw after that was just last week. The investigation teams are nearly done, and the tension in Iraq is mounting. The US government is stepping up its search for an excuse to attack.

A super high-performance battleship is on its way from Japan to the Persian Gulf. With hardly any debate, Japan decided to participate in the war. Compared to the "North Korean question", the Japanese seem to take slight interest in Iraq. In Europe and even in America, hundreds of thousands have held repeated anti-war demonstrations, but in Japan very few can be bothered to protest. The newspapers here treat it all as someone else's problem. Just when the world is about to face a drastic change, the Japanese avert their eyes.

In the above article, I wrote about ordinary Iraqi people who will be killed if war does come. As it turns out, the US is now considering not just bombs and missile, but sending in ground troops to Iraq. Which means there will be American casualties as well.

The short of it is, war means senseless loss of many, many

lives. Which is why any and all diplomatic channels must be used to try to avoid it if at all possible. Secretary of State Powell went to Pyongyang; why can't he go to Bagdad?

This isn't a face-off between major powers like World War II. Iraq today presents no threat to America whatsoever; there is only the most tenuous of grounds for starting a war. In spite of which, other countries seem powerless to stop it. And if we can't stop this war, then what hope is there of stopping the next war? International politics will be driven not by discussion, but by military force.

In the city of Nasiriyah, a man was painting the curbstones white and green around a traffic rotary. I only saw him for an instant out of a moving car, but I can still see the way his hand worked the paintbrush. A simple action people do the same way everywhere. Just trying to get along, trying to live comfortably with the family and neighbours. What else is there, really?

I believe we can still avoid this war.

Natsuki Ikezawa

Christmas morning, December 2002

Okinawa, Japan

Natsuki IKEZAWA

Novelist, poet, essayist, translator of modern Greek poetry.

Born on July the 7th of 1945 in Hokkaido Japan.

Majored physics in Saitama University.

From 1975 lived in Greece for three years.

His books:

Still Lives

- * Akutagawa award
- * English and French translation

The Fall of Macias Guili

- * Tanizaki award
- * German translation

Tio of the Southern Sea Island

- * Shogakukan Juvenile Literature award
- * French translation

His Bones Are Coral Made, Pearls That Were His Eyes

- * French translation

A Burden of Flowers

- * Mainichi Publishing Culture Award
- * English translation
- * French, Greek and Indonesian translations are being prepared.

and many others.

HP = <http://www.cafeimpala.com/indexE.html>

Seiichi MOTOHASHI

Photographer, Film Director

Born on April 3, 1940

Educated in Jiyu Gakuen

Collections of his photographs;

YAMA (A Coal Mine)

- * received The Fifth Taiyo Prize

MUGEN HOYO (Infinite Embrace)

- * received The Annual Award of Japan Professional Photographers Society,
- * The Shashin no Kai Award

NAHJA NO MURA (Nadya's Village)

- * received The 17th Domon Ken Prize

AREKUSEI TO IZUMI (Alexei and the Spring)

and many others.

His films;

Nadya's Village / 1997

- * An official entry at the Berlin International Film Festival
- * Won the OEKOMEDIA Prize of the City of Freiburg (the Grand Prix) at Oekomedia '98,
- * Golden Maile Prize (the Grand Prix) at the Hawaii International Film Festival Documentary section, etc.

Alexei and the Spring / 2002

- * "Readers' Prize of the Berliner Zeitung" and "International Cine Club Prize" in Berlin International Film Festival
- * "The Prize Centaur" (the Grand Prix) in St. Petersburg International Film Festival "Message to Man"
- * "GOLDEN LYNX" for Best Artistic Achievement in ÖKOMEDIA FESTIVAL 2002