

BAGHDADI BATH

Jawad Al Assadi

Translated by Robert Myers and Nada Saab

CHARACTERS

MAJIID

HAMIID



A public bath in Baghdad with small windows and large and small bathing tubs. A large massage table and another smaller table. Upstage center a shower. A misty atmosphere, discarded orange peels, wet rags, articles left by the customers thrown here and there.

HAMIID: (*Violently.*) Filthy son of a bitch!

MAJIID: Who are you cursing?

HAMIID: Come, see for yourself the filth in the bottom of this tub!

MAJIID: Did you forget that the customers of this bath are the lowest of the low?

HAMIID: How do you explain the presence of this knife here, hunh?

MAJIID: That's normal.

HAMIID: The tub reeks of putrid blood. You think that's normal?

MAJIID: Clean the tub and shut up.

HAMIID: What about this gold tooth in the bottom of the tub?

MAJIID: Oh?

HAMIID: It looks like real gold! (*Sarcastically.*) Would it fit on one of your teeth?

MAJIID: (*Hitting HAMIID with a rag.*) Animal . . . stupid moron.

HAMIID: (*Joking with his brother.*) Put it in your mouth.

MAJIID: Let me check it if it's really gold.

HAMIID: I'll give it to the owner of the bath.

MAJIID: Give it to me.

HAMIID: What are you going to do with it?

MAJIID: I'll sell it, of course.

HAMIID: What if it turns out to be fake?

MAJIID: I'll give it to my wife or my mistress. (*He tries the gold tooth in his mouth.*)

HAMIID: (*Looks in the tub.*) Bits of wood . . . tin foil . . . I found it here . . . in piss.
(*MAJIID spits out the gold tooth.*)

MAJIID: How this bath reminds me of my childhood! When my father used to drag me like a puppy to this very bath and this very tub . . . He'd scrub my body with pumice. He'd massage me on this table . . . and lather my head and body . . . Look . . . I brought the same loofah and stone which father used. Here, sniff your father's smell, you moron! Sniff! Come . . . I'll scrape your body as father scraped mine until all your filth goes down the drain. (*Joyfully scrubbing his brother's body.*) Whenever you need, I'll peel an orange for you with these two hands of mine! Here, smell the loofah.

HAMIID: Why is the bath empty?

MAJIID: Fear . . . People are afraid of surprises. That's why they return to their homes before sunset.

HAMIID: And why shouldn't we return to our homes as well?

MAJIID: Because we're not afraid. (*He continues to scrub HAMIID and pours water onto his body.*)

HAMIID: No, I am afraid.

MAJIID: You shouldn't be afraid as long as I'm with you. It's your turn now . . . Pour hot water on my back.

HAMIID: As you wish. (*He scrubs MAJIID hard and pours water on him. MAJIID is overwhelmed with joy.*)

MAJIID: Lather my head.

HAMIID: I am your faithful servant. (*He lathers MAJIID's head.*)

MAJIID: (*Comfortably and peacefully.*) Hamiid . . . Sing to me . . . I love to listen to your voice . . . especially in the baths . . . (*HAMIID begins to sing "The Flying Birds," a popular contemporary Iraqi song. MAJIID sings with him.*) When I was in elementary school my music teacher predicted I'd be a singer.

HAMIID: Your voice is excellent . . . superb.

MAJIID: If I'd followed my teacher's advice I'd have become a famous singer by now, just like Sa'di al-Hilli and Sa'doun al-Jabir and Nazim al-Ghazali. (*HAMIID continues to sing.*) But my misfortune led me to drive buses . . . Oh, how I hate that filthy profession. All I gained from it was cursing, drinking, and hashish. When I look at myself in the mirror I don't recognize my own strange features. I always scream, "Good morning, Majiid . . . Fuck your fate . . . your filthy misfortune." My attitude has changed . . . I've turned rougher with those who ride in my bus . . . I smoke hashish . . . in the open . . . I go hunting for prostitutes. I have them sit next to me on long rides outside of Baghdad . . . I keep kissing them no matter how disgusting their mouths smell . . . I've gotten used to not staying with any of them. I discard them as I discard my shoes at the door of a room . . . I have sex with them as an animal does, without any pleasure . . . I can't tell one from the other. (*HAMIID laughs.*) Their names get jumbled up in my head during sex . . . When I'm coming I call out, "Amina Fahima . . . Fadila Salima." (*HAMIID laughs some more.*) God punished me by making me marry the two women I did. One lost her femininity . . . she's developed a deep voice and grown a moustache.

HAMIID: And the other?

MAJIID: With God's help she turned into a cow . . . As I'm leaving the house she appears from behind the door. (*He imitates a cow.*) But what's worse is God gave me three hunchback daughters. The most I can hope for is they'll marry the local gravedigger and I'll be done with them. (*HAMIID laughs hysterically.*) That's why I started running away from the house. At night I'd sneak out to the nearest bar and keep drinking and smoking hashish until I turned into a worn-out rag . . . then I'd succumb to the first luscious woman I'd see and I'd dance with her, babbling in English, of which I know only WOW . . . NO . . . YES. (*They dance and go downstairs.*) Where is your inhaler? Did you lose it, Hammoud? (*Pause.*) What does "thank you" mean?

HAMIID: It means . . . "fuck you." When are the elections?

MAJIID: What?

HAMIID: The elections?

MAJIID: What made you think about the elections?

HAMIID: I was wondering if you were going to vote.

MAJIID: Walk! (*They walk.*) I'm going to stick my finger in the election ink and vote for the first time! It'll be a chance for me to hug my allies, the Americans.

HAMIID: Hug Americans? (*He groans.*)

MAJIID: You don't see the good they've brought to this country.

HAMIID: When I look at one of them in the street I want to puke.

MAJIID: There's plenty that's positive about them.

HAMIID: I know why you're defending them. Because they keep your buses and trucks in business. You fill your pockets with their dollars.

MAJIID: I swear by God Almighty, if they asked for my life I'd give it to them as a token of my love and gratitude. My body trembles when I see their president on television. I get goose bumps and have an urge to pee when I look at his beautiful smile, the dance of his eyebrows, the way he moves his mouth. It stirs my blood. To me, he's the most charismatic President. Look! My body is trembling . . . (*He shivers.*) . . . at the mere mention of his name. (*HAMIID stuffs an orange in MAJIID's mouth. As MAJIID chews, his features change to resemble an animal. HAMIID ridicules him.*)

HAMIID: Look at your face. You look like an ox. My brother has turned into an ox.

MAJIID (*He screams in HAMIID's face; HAMIID is petrified.*) Enough, son of a bitch! Have you no shame?

HAMIID: (*He screams, then breaks his fear with several scared, stupid laughs.*) You scared me, Majiid. I was joking. Do you remember when you used to yell in my face when we were in school? You'd scare me as you're doing now. Do you remember when you frightened me and made me piss in my pants? Speaking of school days, you didn't ask about my children. They need school supplies. They're starving, and my financial situation is "sub-zero," while you live in another world. You can't even tell them apart. You don't know which one's Majiid and which one's Kaazim, who's Majiida and who's Sajiida.

MAJIID: I know them and I love them.

A powerful explosion. MAJIID goes out to the reception area of the bath. HAMIID is scared and covers his head. After a moment, MAJIID returns. He is frightened.

MAJIID: We have to get back home right away. The owner says the police found four headless bodies in front of the women's bath next door.

HAMIID: I'm not leaving. They'll cut our throats. Let's wait.

MAJIID: Ssshhhh. Don't raise your voice.

Another explosion, nearer. A long silence.

HAMIID: What's the matter with you?

MAJIID: The dream came true.

HAMIID: What dream?

MAJIID: I saw our father's head cut off and thrown into the tub.

HAMIID: You dreamt of him because you're overwhelmed with guilt.

MAJIID: Why would I feel guilty?

HAMIID: Because you haven't visited his grave since he died. You didn't ask for his soul to be blessed. Do something for him. Slaughter a sheep and distribute it to the poor. Sprinkle water on his grave and read the *FatiHa*.

MAJIID: (*Distressed by his brother's words.*) What makes me sad is that Father lived poor and died without friends. No one walked in his funeral procession.

HAMIID: Why are you dismayed with others when you didn't walk in it yourself. Do you know how many people did? Me and my children.

MAJIID: Where was I then?

HAMIID: Ask yourself. Probably drunk in the house of one of your whores.

MAJIID: Son of a bitch.

HAMIID: No, I'm not a son of a bitch!

MAJIID: If you say one more word I'll cut your tongue out with this shoe. Understand?

HAMIID: Why did I ever come with you to this bath? Who knows if some thief or criminal will attack us or kill us, or the occupying soldiers will barge in here to wash their police dogs in these tubs, and then afterwards we'll have to wash ourselves with their piss.

MAJIID: I'm happy with them, happy with their dogs and happy with their dogs' piss.

HAMIID: When you talk that way you disgust me.

MAJIID: Don't insult me, you son of a bitch!

HAMIID: You really disgust me.

MAJIID: Look at me! (*HAMIID takes a good look at him. MAJIID spits in his face.*)

HAMIID: I accept your insult.

MAJIID: Of course you do. You're an insult addict.

HAMIID: I'm not going to say anything because you're my older brother.

MAJIID: Go ahead, speak. You want to insult me because I said I loved them. It's due to them I walk the streets with my head held high. I can talk about anything without fear.

HAMIID: Where is your conscience?

MAJIID: I threw my conscience in the toilet, okay?

HAMIID: I know.

MAJIID: You're too low to know.

HAMIID: After sixteen years of working with you, I know you like you were naked.

MAJIID: How dare you talk to me about nakedness, you son of a bitch. I'll bust your head with this shoe. Where are you going? (*HAMIID runs away. MAJIID follows him.*)

HAMIID: Who used to smuggle merchandise? Who smuggled passports? You were a thief under the old regime, and you're a thief under this one.

MAJIID: Don't run away, come back.

HAMIID: You talk for a minute and then you hit me with that shoe. Can I ask you a question . . . ?

MAJIID: Go ahead, ask.

HAMIID: . . . about your mother?

MAJIID: What about her?

HAMIID: She carried you in her womb for nine months and another fifty years on her head. Did you ever help to carry her? (*MAJIID mumbles curses.*) When your mother got sick and fell down, did you ask her what was the matter? When you came back from Amman or Damascus with tons of flour and provisions, did you ever feed her? To your children and your wives, you give everything, while your mother, who was lying on her deathbed, had to go to sleep hungry. You spend everything on your children without thinking and cheat the brother you've been working with for sixteen years out of the fruits of his labor. The need to feed my children turned me into your meek servant, but I didn't object for fear of losing my livelihood. Admit it, you're the cruelest, most brutal of brothers. You're a lovable thief who steals my strength away with brotherly affection. Don't you ever ask yourself why I'm disturbed? The sudden crying, the fits of hysteria? Forgive me, but I'm going to let everything inside of me out. It will help me if I tell you that you're a person devoid of any conscience, any mercy. You've used me in a vile way for sixteen years. Especially when you used to fill up the bus with smuggled goods and ask me to deliver them to that merchant in Damascus, and I had no idea what they were. How would you have felt if I'd been caught on the Syrian-Iraqi border and thrown in prison? Would it have broken your heart if I'd been put to death for smuggling? Who would've protected my children who already live in a tiny house, with no school, no security, and barely enough to eat? Is this justice? Is this brotherly love? You fell in love with the soldiers. You put all your buses at their service, and you fired me. You hired another driver without giving me one dinar in compensation. You threw me out.

MAJIID: Because you refused to work with them.

HAMIID: I was ashamed to work for them.

MAJIID: I, on the other hand, would deal with the devil to earn my livelihood.

HAMIID: But you have become their pet dog.

MAJIID: My master is my profession.

HAMIID: They occupy your country and you consider them the noblest of God's creatures.

MAJIID: With their help I buried my poverty.
 HAMIID: While poverty has buried me and my children.
 MAJIID: That's because you're irresponsible.
 HAMIID: Why did you steal what was mine?
 MAJIID: What about what's mine? All right, you tell me, what happened to your conscience, your sense of justice and brotherliness in 1998 when I put you in charge of the bus and I told you, "Keep accurate accounts"?
 HAMIID: You'll find no one more upright than me.
 MAJIID: You weren't upright with me. You manipulated the accounts.
 HAMIID: Are you accusing me of stealing?
 MAJIID: Yes, I am.
 HAMIID: (*Yells furiously.*) I would steal from my brother, the son of my mother? (*He turns into a wild beast.*)
 MAJIID: (*Violently.*) Then where did the proceeds of a full year go?
 HAMIID: Is this what all my toil and devotion comes to?
 MAJIID: Okay, then tell me the truth.
 HAMIID: You used to beat me and scream at me. You didn't believe a word I said.
 MAJIID: Are you scared to confess that you're a thief?
 HAMIID: Apologize. Right now.
 MAJIID: You're a professional thief and a low life.
 HAMIID: Say you're sorry or I'll hang myself.
 MAJIID: Hang yourself. Even if you do you'll still have to tell me the truth.
 (*HAMIID rushes toward the shower and tries to hang himself. MAJIID rushes after him and prevents him from doing so.*)
 HAMIID: I confess. Remember January of '98?
 MAJIID: I remember.
 HAMIID: When I came to your house and asked you to give me the bus.
 MAJIID: I remember.
 HAMIID: You gave me the bus.
 MAJIID: I remember.
 HAMIID: I told you about the deal I had with someone high up in the police to operate the bus. The stipulation was that we transport convicted soldiers from one prison to another. We agreed he would pay me two million dinars after the end of the "shift," as he called it. At the same time he made me sign another piece of paper in my own writing that I would keep everything I saw or heard to myself. Otherwise, I'd be killed.
 MAJIID: And you accepted?
 HAMIID: Of course I did. But after I signed I got frightened. I felt I'd made a big mistake. He told me what time the soldiers were to be moved. Sunrise. I arrived the next day, in front of the Radwaniyya Prison. At exactly 5:30 the police began to drag out convicted felons between twenty and thirty years old to humiliate them. They threw them into the bus blindfolded and nearly naked. They gave the signal for me to move. There was one military vehicle in front of the bus and another behind it. After driving for an hour on streets and alleys I didn't know, I saw a huge group of soldiers. They made the prisoners get out, stand in random order, and then suddenly they started shooting. The prisoners fell without saying a

word. The air was engulfed in a horrible silence. I was overwhelmed with fear . . . with filth. It felt like I was their partner in crime. The world turned dark. They didn't even bother to bury these men where they'd murdered them. They wanted to desecrate them even further, so they carried them with blood dripping from their bodies into the bus. They ordered me to drive to somewhere else I didn't recognize. I wanted to puke. The bus reeked of blood. They ceremoniously and joyfully carried the corpses out of the bus and threw them in a ditch . . . With no mercy or compassion . . . More than a dozen gravediggers stood around that ditch and ten minutes later the corpses all disappeared. The officer in charge came to me and ordered me to clean the bus and wipe away all traces of blood. They sat a few feet away from me. One of the soldiers pulled a bottle of *arak* out of his jacket and gulped at it. Others smoked and told jokes and laughed out loud. It was the worst moment of my life. They returned to the bus as if they hadn't committed a crime. On the contrary, they seemed even happier. They played cards and sang. The officer in charge told me I shouldn't find what had happened strange at all. They were in a struggle against traitors to the nation. He insisted that I stay close to them and help them in their mission. He said they were going to keep me in prison for a few days . . . until the operation was over, which meant they were putting me in solitary confinement. The next day, at dawn, they repeated the same operation. They filled the bus with forty young men, all sentenced to death. On the third day there were more, seventy condemned men. They even asked me to put the corpses in bags, to carry the bodies up to the bus on my shoulders, to smoke with them, and play cards, to tell them dirty jokes. They forced me to get drunk. They wanted to humiliate me. They put a machine gun in my hand and screamed, "Shoot, you son of a . . . Shoot hard! Shoot up in the air!" They turned me into a mop they used to clean up their crimes. I got sick. I puked blood. I lost my appetite. I turned pale and thin. I beat my head against the prison walls. I fell to the floor. I cried. They took me to a military hospital for treatment. After a month the same officer came to see me. He threatened to cut my tongue out if I said a word about what I'd seen. "We've decided to accept your service with us as a gift," he said. "A most valuable contribution to the nation. We're not going to give you one dinar." (*He puts his head in the pail and pukes. He screams. He rushes toward the shower to wash himself. MAJIID rushes after him.*)

MAJIID: Forget the past. We must take advantage of the present situation to make up for our losses. We'll turn over a new leaf for the sake of our families. Do not despair. I will provide you with an excellent opportunity that will make you forget all my past mistakes. Come on, give me a chance. Don't refuse to work with me this time. If you do we'll both lose big because the catch is precious. We have to leave Baghdad tomorrow at dawn. The man we're going to bring from Amman to Baghdad is rich. He has more money than all the Arab governments combined. He's one of the most important candidates up for election in the next round.

HAMIID: (*He looks at MAJIID suspiciously.*) All right. I'll do it.

MAJIID: I knew I could count on you.

HAMIID: But I'll be the driver this time. And I'll drive in my own crazy way.

MAJIID: I'll be your right hand.

HAMIID: I'll fly. I'll go so fast I'll leave all the other cars and trucks behind me. But Majiid, you won't deceive me this time.

MAJIID: I swear by God, if the plan works this time I'll take you to the nearest brothel and introduce you to many luscious women, black ones, white ones. We'll dance with them and babble in English.

HAMIID sings "The Flying Birds." Strong winds, explosions. Dogs howling and the sound of car horns, and, even louder, the sound of people's voices. Lights change. MAJIID and HAMIID enter wearing heavy clothes because they are now at the border, where it is very cold. In front of them is a coffin.

MAJIID: Where were you? Why did you disappear? Are you crazy? Don't take another step without telling me.

HAMIID: I went to look for the toilet, but I found a dead woman dumped on the pavement. I tried to find you where the passports are stamped but you weren't there. Did you get the passports stamped?

MAJIID: (*Shivering.*) Come, sit next to me.

The sounds of strong winds and explosions continue. MAJIID drinks arak and HAMIID eats tomatoes and cucumbers.

HAMIID: The soldiers have blocked the road and aren't allowing the buses and trucks to pass. Majiid, I'm cold, I'm scared.

MAJIID: You have to hang on until they let us cross.

HAMIID: I can't hang on. I'm sick of you and this disgusting occupation.

MAJIID: I prayed to God that He would get us to Baghdad safely, but unfortunately my plan failed.

HAMIID: Why did you lie to me?

MAJIID: I didn't lie to you. Fate turned against us.

HAMIID: You made rosy promises to me that you didn't keep.

MAJIID: Yes, I made promises, but I didn't expect the candidate to die on the way.

HAMIID: He was just fine at the Jordanian border. He put a cigar in his mouth, gel in his hair and cologne on his neck. He was dreaming of winning the election. He kissed his mistress, put his arm around her, and suddenly she screamed. His head exploded.

MAJIID: Why, oh God, why!

HAMIID: He fell in front of her like a handful of dust. It would've been better if he'd died on the Jordanian side. But as soon as we crossed the border his head exploded.

MAJIID: If only he'd died at the Jordanian border.

HAMIID: Look! The soldiers are coming towards us. Talk to them. I'm afraid. Say something.

MAJIID: Hello! Hello! Please help us. Let us pass. We've been entrusted with this man's body, and we're obliged to return him to his family fast. Viva! Viva!

HAMIID: You say "Viva!?" They're blocking the road.

MAJIID: They're blocking the road to catch those who are causing explosions and setting off booby traps.

HAMIID: They themselves are the ones setting them off.

MAJIID: Talk to the female soldier standing there. Lie to her. Tell her we love them and we pray they will stay here.

HAMIID: No! You go and talk to her! You're my big brother, aren't you?

MAJIID: You moron, you speak better English than I do. Go!

HAMIID: I'm scared. I have to pee.

MAJIID: You have to pee every half hour.

HAMIID: I shouldn't go pee? I should pee in my pants?

MAJIID: Then watch out for stray bullets!

HAMIID: You think stray bullets only come when I want to pee? *(He goes off to pee. As he pees, he sings. A loud explosion. Frightened, he screams and returns to his brother.)* Majiid, the coffin's moving.

MAJIID: Your brain is moving. Come, don't be afraid.

HAMIID: What if the dogs smell the candidate's corpse? Dogs here at the border can't tell the difference between a candidate and a regular civilian. And what about my money?

MAJIID: You will get what we had agreed on. *(His cell phone rings. He answers.)* Huh, Ghizlaan! My darling, Ghizlaan. I miss you. I bought you a wonderful gift. Black genuine kohl for your eyes and a fiery red dress. On the border. Listen, prepare the *Jaajjik*, the yogurt with cucumbers and garlic. Smash that garlic well. I love you madly. Bye! *(He kisses the phone, then to his brother.)* The female soldier's back.

HAMIID: You go. I've decided to go back to Amman.

MAJIID: Why?

HAMIID: Because you deceived me. You get money from here and there, and then you claim you never got paid.

MAJIID: Why don't you trust me?

HAMIID: I know about the deals you've done with the brokers and middlemen.

MAJIID: I work with anyone who makes my life better.

HAMIID: Even if it's the devil?

MAJIID: In my opinion, most men have turned into devils.

HAMIID: Even me?

MAJIID: No, you're a crazy angel, which is why you're stuck in the mud.

HAMIID: It's better than working with you. I'm going back to Amman. Give me my passport.

MAJIID: I won't give you your passport unless you convince that soldier to help me. Lie to her. Tell her the corpse we have is one of a kind. A "classy" corpse of someone nominated for a high position. Hold her responsible for any delay. And you carry the corpse on your back. *(He throws HAMIID on the coffin. HAMIID drags the coffin toward the unseen soldier and kneels beside it and prays.)*

HAMIID: *(A prayer.)* Good morning, explosions. Good morning, booby traps. Good morning, murderers and ambulances. Good morning, corpses lying on the pavement. *(To the unseen female soldier.)* Please, miss, let us cross the border to Baghdad. It's very important. Today is my daughter Fatima's birthday, and I bought her a doll. Please let us pass. Yes . . . What . . . ? Search the corpse . . . ?

No. That's horrible . . . But he's dead. How could you desecrate a dead man . . . ?

No, I won't be part of a crime like that. No! Don't let them search him!

MAJIID: What did you say?

HAMIID: Hide the body. Don't give it to them.

MAJIID: Are you crazy? Let her search it.

HAMIID: I quit. I'm going back to Amman.

MAJIID: You're going to leave me in the cold with these cruel soldiers and these howling dogs.

HAMIID: Yes.

MAJIID: You're going to leave me alone with this corpse?

HAMIID: Give me my passport.

MAJIID: (*Grabbing his brother by the neck.*) I swear to God, if you don't go over to that soldier and convince her to let us pass I'm going to pull your eyes out with my own hands.

HAMIID: Why are you making me carry this corpse on my back and smell its stench? You haven't paid me one dinar.

MAJIID: I wasn't paid myself.

HAMIID: I know where you hid the money.

MAJIID: Are you spying on me, you son of a bitch?

HAMIID: You dirty, lowlife son of a bitch. Give me my passport.

MAJIID: I'll only give you your passport if they let me pass. I'm not taking you with me to Baghdad.

HAMIID: I don't want to go back with you. I'm leaving you this time with no regrets. You destroyed my life and the lives of my children. You lied to me. When you say, "Good morning," you lie, when you say, "Good evening," you lie. You lie . . . lie. . . . lie. (*He snatches the passport from his brother's hand and leaves.*)

MAJIID: I will not give up this corpse even if the ground explodes under my feet and thunder roars above my head. The most important thing is to get this coffin to Baghdad. I'm going over to that soldier and convince her to let me cross the border. I'm not going to object to anything. Even if she wants to strip the dead man naked and desecrate his body. Yes, she can strip search him and do whatever she wants. All I care about is getting to Baghdad, delivering the dead man to his family and getting the money I was promised. (*He moves beside the coffin, in front of the unseen soldier. He speaks to her.*) The weather's so brutally cold it could kill a beast. (*Sarcastically.*) I congratulate you on your perseverance in defending the security of my country. I too am defending my country in my own way. That's why I'm carrying the corpse of one of our most successful nominees. It must be painful for you to be away from your family, your country, and your children. I have no doubt you want to go back home. I know that here you're deprived of intimacy and intercourse. You want to return to a warm home, to the theatre and the movies and play the piano for hours, to walk your dog on the streets of New York and travel by train to Texas. I too went to Amman dreaming of a strong nominee for our elections. But instead I reached this border with a frightening corpse. Please let me pass with this corpse to Baghdad. I kiss your hand, your boot, the barrel of your gun. If you want to search the body, go ahead. Search it any way you wish. Strip him naked, strip him of his dignity.

A very loud explosion. The light changes to one similar to the first scene, but dingier now. MAJIID and HAMIID are now back in the bath again.

MAJIID: Hamiid, Hammoud, where are you? Give me your hand. (*He holds out his hand in the steam. HAMIID does not take his hand.*)

HAMIID: If we had taken up the profession of grave digging instead of driving we would've made millions of dinars. It's an ideal profession. No losses. People die in explosions, they kill each other in the streets and they are taken to graves. Gravediggers deal with corpses they don't own. They bury them in earth they don't own. It's a golden profession.

MAJIID: And if I were a gravedigger I'd wish I were a worm. And if that worm could speak, it would say, (*panting:*) "I'm coming . . . I'm coming . . ."

HAMIID: But you'd be a repressed worm. Did you get the corpse to the cemetery? (*MAJIID is silent.*)

Why don't you answer?

MAJIID: I didn't get paid.

HAMIID: I'm sure you were paid and hid the money from me.

MAJIID: Believe me, can't you? I swear on my dead mother and my children's eyesight that all I was paid was the howling of dogs.

HAMIID: Liar.

MAJIID: I'm lying? Why are you talking to me this way? Did you forget I'm your older brother?

HAMIID: Admit it.

MAJIID: Admit what?

HAMIID: Where's the corpse? Did you get it to the family? How much money did you make? Come on.

MAJIID: There was an explosion . . . I gathered up the pieces . . . of the corpse. I returned the head, the feet, and the hands to the coffin. I drove the bus as fast as I could, hoping to get the body to the cemetery in Baghdad where the family was waiting. Suddenly a chopper descended near my bus, and I was ordered to get out. The soldiers asked for my passport. They searched the bus and opened the coffin. They looked at the corpse, disgusted, but they didn't ask me anything. They told me to drive the bus and follow them. And I did, for four hours, into the desert. I was frightened to death of them. I didn't know what they wanted or why they'd led me to this strange place. His family was waiting there in the cemetery, and the body was with me in the bus. I prayed to God to save me. Suddenly the soldiers all stopped, so I did, too. They took off, carrying their weapons towards some orchards off in the distance, deep in the desert, looking for armed men, and they forgot about me. I stayed in the bus with the rising stench of the corpse. I asked myself what I should do if they didn't come back. I thought, if I leave or go towards them they're going to shoot me. I didn't know where I was or which way to go. It was getting dark. The stench made me vomit. I could hear the howling of the dogs coming closer. I was alone with my agony, and at that moment I needed you. There was nothing else for me to do except to stay in the bus with the coffin, praying to all the saints in the desert. Would the dogs devour me and the corpse? The only thing I could think of was to bury

the corpse right there. I dug with my hands and fingernails. I dug and dug and dug. The rabid dogs came closer to the bus. I carried the pieces of the corpse out of the bus and threw them in the hole and covered them . . . covered them with dust. It was so vile and horrible. I wished for a moment I was dead. I hated myself. I cried so hard. It was midnight. I sat by the grave and realized I was all alone. I couldn't think of anyone but mother. I thought, would she forgive me if I asked her to? I wanted to erase all my mistakes and wash my sins away in front of her. The sun came up. For three days and three nights the tanks passed in front of me and circled around me . . . the helicopters were above my head. Soldiers passed in front of me without speaking . . . they wouldn't let me move. The dogs roamed all around the bus, in the bus, on top of the bus. Then the soldiers came running back . . . with their machine guns. They went inside the bus again and yelled, "Where's the dead man? What's his name? Where's his passport?" I didn't know what to do, Hamoud. I told them the truth. They told me to dig him up. I dug and dug with my hands . . . with my fingernails. I held up his feet . . . his head . . . his hands. They started to laugh. They aimed their guns at me . . . then they pushed me into the grave and covered me with dust. And then . . . they disappeared.

HAMIID carries MAJIID to the shower. He bathes MAJIID.

ROBERT MYERS is a playwright whose plays include *Atwater: Fixin' to Die*, *The Lynching of Leo Frank* and *Mesopotamia*. He is an Associate Professor of English and Creative Writing at the American University of Beirut.

NADA SAAB is an Assistant Professor of Arabic Literature and Studies at the Lebanese American University in Beirut. Her principal area of research is Sufi literature.