



Photo: Mohammad al-Harathi

ZAHIR AL- GHAFRI

SELECTED POEMS

*Translated by Salih J. Altoma
with Margaret Obank*

THE PERPLEXITY OF THE POET

The poet wakes,
in his head a sentence heavy with darkness
He hallucinates, he hallucinates a long while
but still no door lets in a chink of light
His perplexed expression is the message
the last message, that will reach no one
The windows are shut
and he has to leave for the land of his dreams
to pick that poisoned flower he'd heard about but never seen.
Like a prisoner rolling a rock
his hallucination leads him
to the wells of his childhood
where he hears a far-off voice calling him:

–You, madman!
–You are possessed!
–You will never recover!

NEVER

You will never go beyond this point
You will never see beyond this window
Even that fountain,
you will never see that fountain in which
man seeks to drown himself and be reborn
Do you want to test your destiny at the brink?
But probably you are a dead man walking
in darkness, intoning your song of endless exile
You will never go . . .
You will never see . . .
And the vision you seek will never appear before you
Here ends forever your adventure
Here is revealed the nakedness of time

THE ANGEL OF POWER

We sit on the bank of this river
We, the prisoners of defeats, sit
waiting for the angel of power
to appear any moment now
radiating rage

Our voices are lost in distant orbits
There's no guide to lead us from the interminable waiting
behind doors, ignored by the winds

And so we wait
until the seven pillars of heaven turn white
Perhaps one day, on a day like this,
our wish will come, borne on wings
that glint like knives
and perhaps the sky will be filled with stars.

HERBS OF THE PAST

Thus...

did an icy sun hurl you into the depths of the forest
Now the song on the angel's lips is your guide to life
but you will never look into its mirror
for the way is awash with secrets
and the burdensome years
run away from you

Night – your mysterious twin – reflects in your face
your fears of fate and adventure
that your life is trivial and wanting,
a window opening on an abyss
Take, then, a rest under the tree,
rest and remember the herbs of your past.
Your sufferings will amply suffice
as the light of childhood flees the river of your life.

The shepherd woman who lured you to the cave
in a flash, with a single stroke,
has snatched the pearl of your heart.

CROSSING THE NORTH SEA

You will get there, for sure,
so ignore the storm tonight
Even if your leaving is perilous
you will get there, for sure
Even if fate is watching
like a wolf, waiting for your crossing
in the temptation of the night
on a sea guarded by pirates and demons
you must cross the river of gossip
from where the breaths of the drowned rise
You will get there, for sure
Even if the single candle you hold
is snuffed out
like the night of wilderness
you will get there, for sure

I have tried this. I tried it
Even though I speak to you now
from the bed of eternity
do not be distracted by anything
Even if the walls are high
look around you only with confidence
as if you have wings poised to soar
And you will meet your other life,
your childhood whose psalms you lost
under Scorpio's constellation
The storm will abate for you
like a faithful mother forever waiting.

A ROOM AT THE END OF THE WORLD

In a distant room, at the end of the world
at the end of a stormy night
I remember you now as a phantom
accidentally passing near the fountain of my life
like a feather blown backwards
onto a land I rarely visit

I listen to your absence at the window of truth
The guests are gone
There's no trace of living shadows
nor flowers, either, left on the doorstep

My glance toward you while you are absent
is the repentance of the unfaithful
The sands scatter my dreams on your bed
and remorse perfumes you with the fragrance of water, white like the night,

You and I are two banks between which my life
passes as it floats on the glow of eternity
Tonight your fruits are golden
and music starts to play, a soft drizzle
from a distant room at the end of the world

THE VISITOR

Let me pass by,
me, the strange visitor, carrying
on my wings the dust of nights
while within me lives an ember,
the sun of long years.

None but me wishes to tell
what happened in the past
No one except me,
I am the magpie of ages
and the lord of fortresses.

In my fiery gaze I gather
facts and dreams.
Between my claws I hear the snake's
last breath.
And yet, my heart is the heart of a compassionate angel.

FLOWERS IN A WELL

Here is the truth revealed to you at last:
Once, your dreams smelled of eternity.
I look at you as a man who begs a virgin stone
I am your shadow that was.
I am the mirror which reflected your flowers in a well.

I am the stranger now.
How often did I cry over you, over the fruits of the night
for your sake, for the sake of a fate
that's like a poisoned paradise?
Now I cannot sleep, forever on a knife-edge.

THOSE YEARS

At times, I leave my life there with my comrades-in-pain
at the high walls of fate and walk on calmly,
a man wandering through an orchard

filled with scents of the past
I think I see, whenever I sit on river banks,
a smile forged from the flare of night

My dreams too, wave after wave of them, billow over the grass,
gleaming like pure gold.
I live in a city that meanders through my memory. My father
guards time in deserted gardens. And my mother
gathers wood in the wilderness.
My life, in those years, was a journey
bearing only grapes of loss.
But in spite of that I knew
how to climb fortresses in the midday heat of the sun.

THE BALCONY

Calmly, from the balcony I watch
a passing cloud
then reflect on how my life stumbles on the high slopes.
as I move on with no side arm
no gesture, even, from a stranger's hand
When I sleep
river waters flow into my dreams
and I hear the cries of angels
lost in the desert.

GO AND BID FAREWELL

That village, sleeping in the heart of the mountains
That village, an illusion captive to the hand of fate
its truths are but winds of sand
its stones only icons, symbols.
That cool slumber in the bed of the unknown
That destiny which vanishes in the fog of the world.
Go and bid farewell to that small village.

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the author's collection *Azhar fi bi'r* [*Flowers in a Well*],
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