



ILLUMINATED VERSES

POETRIES OF THE ISLAMIC WORLD

Essays on the occasion of

I L L U M I N A T E D V E R S E S

Poetries of the Islamic World

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Lee Briccetti

Executive Director, Poets House

ILLUMINATED VERSES:
POETRIES OF THE ISLAMIC WORLD

A window for seeing.
A window for hearing.
A window like a well
that plunges to the heart of the earth...

—Forugh Farrokhzad, “Window”¹

The discussions and readings of *Illuminated Verses* bring together poets, scholars, performers, and poetries from around the Islamic world—as a window for seeing and hearing, as a well to the heart of our humanity.

Poetry is one of the most beloved art forms in the Islamic world. But to say so is a generalization, since there is no single Islamic world. Poetry, too, is multiple.

So, rather, we say: *welcome*. Welcome to this special conference and celebration, as we explore poetries from diverse cultures and languages, and experience the art’s many pleasures.

The *Illuminated Verses* panel discussions and evening performances, presented on May 7, 2011 at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, cannot be comprehensive. Nonetheless, they are abundant; from events focused on centuries-old verse traditions of Sufi and Golden Age Arabic poets to discussions of modernist and contemporary practitioners. They were preceded by events that contextualized this conference—an open seminar on the Qur’an; an overview of the literary histories of Islam; and evenings on poetries from Persia, Pakistan, West Africa, and Morocco. Yet, this can only be a beginning.

Vilification of Islam in our national dialogue, particularly over the last decade, has compounded age-old Western stereotypes and re-emphasized divisions. Many ossified preconceptions—some from the Middle Ages—have rendered Islamic literatures almost unknown to us. But thankfully, a new generation of translators and anthologists has begun to open this work to new audiences, inviting general readers—as Whitman bade us—to sift for ourselves.

In some sense, *Illuminated Verses* is also *Illuminated Voices*. While writing expands thinking immeasurably, allowing for memory beyond the single mind, orality and the spoken word live in our writing. This is particularly true in poetry, as the breath of the poet’s voice creates a palpable music in a world of sound. *Illuminated Verses* makes a point of foregrounding the exchanges between oral formulas and written texts, which have characterized many literatures throughout the Islamic world.

While all serious writers engage in a dialogue with the oral and literary traditions that have shaped them, as members of a non-specialist audience approaching these literatures for the first time, we may not be aware of all of the rich nuances they carry. Yet wider community engagement in respectful listening will inevitably lead us to make new discoveries.

We know that there are complexities in these discussions—some having to do with what we bring to our own listening; some on the page, connected to translation; others geographical and political. Last fall, when Poets House hosted Urdu poet Afzal Ahmend Syed—or rather, publicly teleconferenced with him because he was denied a visa—we were moved by the wry dissent of his work. “If my voice is not reaching you / add to it the echo— / echo of ancient epics...”² he writes.

Though, ultimately, his voice reached us, it was not easy to enter into our exchange given the enforced geographic distance. We also encountered a basic paradox in Syed’s work that has been present throughout this series: not all the scholars and writers assembled in these pages, or at these events, identify themselves as “Islamic” writers even if they are consciously working in relationship to Islamic traditions.

Illuminated Verses is supported by a special grant from the Bridging Cultures Initiative of the National Endowment for the Humanities. We are especially grateful for their commitment to generative conversation as a force in a strong democracy. We thank all presenters, essayists and the many advisors who provided ideas and assisted with planning sessions: among them, Najwa Adra, Ammiel Alcalay, Kazim Ali, Steve Caton, Pierre Joris, and Khalad Mattawa.

Poets House is delighted to have co-organized this remarkable convening with City Lore, the organization with which we produced many joyous *People's Poetry Gatherings*. And we acknowledge the significant partnership of the Asia Society and the Borough of Manhattan Community College.

Newly settled into our permanent home at 10 River Terrace, just blocks away from the Borough of Manhattan Community College campus where the conference is being held, Poets House is a 50,000-volume poetry library that invites everyone into the living traditions of poetry. *Illuminated Verses* is emblematic of the work Poets House loves to do. We host hundreds of events each year documenting poetic practices from around the globe, as we make a place for poetry in our cultural landscape and in individual lives, one by one.

Poets House's co-founder, Stanley Kunitz wrote that poetry is history's most enduring recording device, telling us what it feels like to be alive in a certain time and place. We hope that these programs will initiate ongoing dialogue, expanding our pleasure in these literatures, which are so rich a part of our shared human legacy.

*You are this passage being deciphered,
born in each interpretation...*

—Adonis, “The Beginning of the Book”³

Steve Zeitlin

Executive Director, City Lore

PATHWAYS TO ILLUMINATED VERSES

In 2003, as part of City Lore’s *Poetry Dialogues*, workshop co-leader Bushra Rehman sought to engage one of the students, Mugeeb, with a free verse poem. He complained, “All the American poetry I see, it’s not like Arabic poetry. It doesn’t rhyme. It doesn’t have a—” he paused, unable to think of the word.

“A form?”

“Yeah. A form. How do you know if something is a poem?” He seemed frustrated,” Bushra observed, “and I could tell that this was something that he had been struggling with.” Bushra pointed out that some of our poetry, like sonnets and blues poetry, does have a prescribed form, but Mugeeb wasn’t convinced. Then she pointed at a picture of Walt Whitman on the wall and said, “It’s all his fault.”

As she described in her essay, “Recite! Teaching Poetry to Muslim-American Youth and Allies in NYC,” “American poetry is like American culture. Our lack of tradition is our tradition. The students laughed,” she wrote, “but I knew that Mugeeb’s question was not just about poetry, it was about understanding American culture where all the rules were missing.”

As City Lore and Poets House began to plan *Illuminated Verses*, we sought to convey the diversity of Islamic cultures and poetry (Many writers from the Middle East and South Asia, for instance, do write in free verse.) Our goal was to render Islamic cultures more accessible to U.S. audiences by highlighting poetry, which is to much of the Islamic world what movies or pop music are to American culture.

With that in mind, we decided to ask some of the participants in our program to write about what first inspired them about Islamic poetry. It also motivated me to reflect on what inspired City Lore to join forces with Poets House for this endeavor.

I realized that what inspired us began right here in New York. Exploring the cultures that comprise the city, we were also discovering the poetries of the Islamic world. We were struck by the devotion of the Muslim communities to their poetry traditions and their desire to have other New Yorkers share in them. At our 1999 *Poetry Gathering*, crowds lined up around the block, fighting for tickets for a sold-out show, “Drunken Love,” with Iranian singer Sharam Nazeri singing the work of the Persian classical poet and mystic Rumi. In 2004, we held a *mushaira* Poetry Dinner at Shaheen’s Sweets in Jackson Heights. Each of the local Pakistani poets contributed one *ghazal* for the program. A college professor in the group provided a literal translation of each poem. The translation was read as well as the *ghazal* in the original language at the event. In addition, poet Bob Holman worked with the poets to create a more free-flowing and poetic English-language version of the poem which he performed. As is the custom at a *mushaira*, when the poet reads a line that the audience likes, the audience responds with a “wawa,” and the poet repeats the line with even greater emphasis. For most of the poems, the original versions were met with multiple “wawas,” the literal English translations with only a few. The freewheeling and poetic English translations and performances by Holman were met with a shower of “wawas,” to the delight of the participating poets.

Among the inspirations for this program, too, was anthropologist Steven Caton’s book, *Peaks of Yemen I Summon*, which illustrates how forms such as the *zamil*—a rhyming two-line poem—can be used for negotiation in tribal cultures, how improvised forms like the *balah*—composed as a duel by two or more poets—are performed at weddings and how longer poems circulate throughout Yemen on cassettes. I was struck by the centrality of poetry in this Islamic culture. Abu Dhabi television, I learned, broadcasts a kind of *American Idol* for poetry! And poetry and song were central to the recent Egyptian revolution. (In the song “Sout al-Horeya,” by Eid Amir and Many Adel, posted on YouTube, “Our dreams were our weapon... we write our history with our blood.”)

In the same way that American movies and popular culture have created a pathway to understanding the U.S. for those abroad, heightening awareness of an art form central to many Muslim cultures can better enable Americans to relate to those cultures. We hope that creating an appreciation for an art form central to many Islamic cultures in this time of turmoil may help build some bridges and heal some wounds.

The potential of poetry to create indelible images, to extend the reach of language, and to express complex ideas and feelings through metaphor makes it a powerful force for illuminating cultural experiences. Characterized by the intensification of language, poetry is an ideal form for artfully expressing individual and collective identities. As cultures clash over religion, *Illuminated Verses: Poetries from the Islamic World* invites disparate cultures to see one another anew.

The planning for *Illuminated Verses* reminded me of a line from Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks:

*There is some kiss we want with
our whole lives, the touch of*

*spirit on the body. Seawater
begs the pearl to break its shell.*

Poetry, ubiquitous and revered throughout much of the Islamic world, is a pearl often hidden and underappreciated by the West. For our audiences, we hope to crack the shell to reveal some of the Islamic world's most precious jewels.

Persis Karim

MY FATHER'S HOUSE

Poetry has always lived in my house. My father, Alexander Karim, immigrated from Iran to the United States after the Second World War at a time when there were few Iranians in the United States; his love of poetry anchored him both to his past in Iran and as a transplant in the New World. Although he was an engineer, like most Iranians my father could call up from memory hundreds of poems from the great classics of Persian literature. But even in his accented English, my father spoke in poetic phrases that were a combination of the poems in his brain and his own renderings of them in his daily disposition towards American life. I remember well the ways that he imparted his philosophy of how to live life—one part Sa'di, one part Khayyam, two parts American individualism, and one part Alex Karim's bold vision of life.

We didn't really know it as children, and often we didn't quite understand, but what he was doing in sharing the poetry and the proverbs of his Iranian culture was teaching us a bit about how to conduct ourselves in life. Sometimes he'd reach for a proverb or an expression to say something important about how to treat others; sometimes to admonish us; and, at other times, simply to play with language. Some of the expressions I still remember learning (which he rendered into English) are: "*zabunam moo dar-avard*" (My tongue is growing hair from talking too much) or "*dast-e shoma dard nakonad*" (May your hands not hurt from your generosity). Although this was the culture of Iran that I acquired in the osmosis of my American childhood, and almost nothing of it was actually in Persian, I recall the power of his words and the way they fell on my ears like the pearls of poems. I learned to love poetry by listening to him speak, by listening to him recite poetry and share his passion for it.

When I became a teenager I made my first foray into Persian poetry. It was in 1976 after my father took a brief side trip back to Iran after more

than a decade travelling for business in Asia. He returned to California with a suitcase full of souvenirs and gifts that included books of poetry in Persian. Among them were collections of poetry by Hafez, Mowlana (Rumi), Farrokhzad, and Khayyam. In response to my curiosity, my father opened one of the books and began to read. His voice was large and musical as he followed the lines of Persian script across the page from right to left. His enchanting reading of Omar Khayyam's poetry in Persian sparked questions. Khayyam was among the classical Persian poets better known in the West because of the nineteenth century translation of his *Rubaiyat* by the British Orientalist, Edward FitzGerald. My father loved Khayyam's joie de vivre spirit, and although he was a medieval Muslim who leaned more on the Sufi side, his work was a bit less serious and more accessible than some of the other giants of Persian poetry. For my dad, the well-worn copy of FitzGerald's *Rubaiyat*, which he found in a thrift shop, became something of his Bible. My father gravitated toward Khayyam because he was a poet-philosopher influenced by inquiry and discovery in mathematics, philosophy, and the intellectual arts of the great medieval Islamic period. Among my father's favorite quatrains (*roba'i*) were the following:

Ah, my Beloved, fill the Cup that clears
To-day of past Regrets and future Fears
To-morrow?—Why, To-morrow I may be
Myself with Yesterday's Sev'n Thousand Years.¹

Another of Khayyam's quatrains that was especially dear to my father became a kind of mantra for his old age and growing awareness of death. Khayyam's poetic articulation of life's fleetingness and the living-in-the-moment spirit comforted him and us. The *roba'i* he most loved we recited as we spread his ashes in the mountains of the Sierra Nevadas:

With the seed of Wisdom did I sow,
And with mine own hand wrought to make it grow;
And this was all the Harvest that I reap'd
"I came like Water, and like Wind I go."

From that same suitcase of goodies in 1976, my father also introduced me to Forugh Farrokhzad's *Tavallodi-Digar (Another Birth)*. Although she was among only a handful of contemporary female poets, Forugh had a dramatic impact on modern Iranian poetry. It would be almost twenty years later, however, while studying Persian literature for a Ph.D. program in comparative literature that I would begin to grasp the full impact of Forugh's poems and understand her significance in Persian literature. Her poems were unique and bold and pushed the boundaries of what a female poet could actually say, but her life also represented much about the shifting culture of twentieth-century Iran. The poem "Sin" was particularly compelling as it explored woman's desire and named things an Iranian woman had never said in a poem (quoted in part below):

I have sinned a rapturous sin
in a warm enflamed embrace,
sinned in a pair of vindictive arms,
arms violent and ablaze.

[...]

In that quiet vacant dark
I sat beside him punch-drunk,
his lips released desire on mine,
grief unclenched my crazy heart. ²

Not only did Forugh's poetry resonate for me with the spirit and soul of Khayyam's work, but it also became an inspiration for my own poetry writing. By the time I finished graduate school, I was interested in the idea that I was part of a generation of Iranian-Americans who were writing about Iran and the impact of Iranian culture and events such as the 1979 Iranian Revolution on their lives. My discovery of Forugh and other Persian poets led me to want to collect and edit the first anthology of Iranian-American writing, which was published in 1999 as *A World Between: Poems, Short Stories and Essays by Iranian Americans* and bridged my interest as a scholar and poet.

Kazim Ali

THE ROSE IS MY QIBLA:
SOHRAB SEPEHRI'S JOURNEY EAST

When my father went to Iran to work, he wanted to know what to bring back for me. Other than his voice, I wondered, whispering again the call to prayer into my ears?

Poetry, I told him, bring me poetry. He brought me several books of contemporary Iranian poets translated into English, among them a couple of short books by Sohrab Sepehri. The translations were rough, but through the words I *felt*, in another language, one I didn't know, the reach of Sepehri toward understanding.

Growing up, my father recited to us Urdu verse, Arabic chapters from the Qur'an; Farsi hovered in the background, as my great-grandmother was Persian from Kerman. The sounds of these languages, along with English, Tamil, and Telugu nestled in my ear with the echoes of my daily prayers. But I wandered—a Muslim of queer disposition and yogic leanings, wandering and wondering between Vedanta and Sufi teachings, always not-knowing, always happily not-found.

Sohrab Sepehri left Iran and traveled through China, India, and Japan during 1964; when he returned home he wrote a rapturous poem called “Water’s Footfall,” a “lyric-epic” as influenced by Islam and Sufi philosophy as it is by the Buddhist and Hindu philosophies and beliefs Sepehri was exposed to during his journey.

“I am a Muslim,” Sepehri declares, early in the poem, but then goes on to clarify:

I am a Muslim:
The rose is my *qibla*.
The stream my prayer-rug, the sunlight my clay tablet.
My mosque is the meadow.

I rinse my arms for prayers along with the thrum and pulse of windows.
Through my prayers streams the moon, the refracted light of the sun.
Through translucent chapters I look down at the stones in the stream-bed.

Every part of my prayer can be seen through. ¹

Sepehri is at home in the natural world, the world that exists, and his God is not bodiless nor remote but incarnate in every piece of matter and as close as the nearest living thing. When Muslims pray we pray in the direction of the Ka'ba in Mecca. This direction—designated in hotels in the Islamic world by a golden arrow imprinted on the ceiling—is called the *qibla*. In the earliest days of Islam, this *qibla* was toward the Far Mosque in Jerusalem, but after the Prophet's Mi 'raj (Night Journey), the *qibla* was changed to the Near Mosque, the Ka'ba.

Abraham and his son, Ishmael, built the Ka'ba on the site supposedly marking the place where Adam and Eve entered the earth. They used as a cornerstone a rock Ishmael brought with him—called later in the *zibur* (Psalms) of David “the stone that the Builder refused,” perhaps a metaphor for Ishmael himself. Called by Muslims simply “the Black Stone,” it marks the place at the Ka'ba where devoted pilgrims are to begin their prescribed circumambulations of the mosque. The Ka'ba is an entity fixed—for millennia—at the heart of Mecca and at the heart of Islam. But nothing is fixed—not locality, not divinity—for Sepehri. He writes:

My Ka'ba is there on the stream-bank, in the shade
of the acacia trees.
Like a light breeze, my Ka'ba drifts
from orchard to orchard, town to town.

My Black Stone is the sunlight in the flowers.

This experience of rapture floods the long prose lines of the poem which begins in a poetic autobiography recounting the death of the poet's

father, his experiences dealing with grief and doubt, and then growing up and leaving home: “I saw a man down at heels going door to door asking for canary songs, I saw a street cleaner praying, pressing his forehead on a melon rind.”

This conflation of ordinary things, discarded things, with the spiritual and divine seems to suffuse the poem. The small clay tablet upon which Shi’a Muslims press their foreheads when they pray is usually made, not of melon rind, but of sacred clay taken from the earth at Karbala, Iraq, the place at which Imam Hussain, grandson of Prophet Muhammad, was killed by his political rivals in the Damascus Caliphate. But here, the regular institutions of knowledge do not suffice. If Sepehri seems Sufi in inclination it is the Sufism of Rabi’a or Lalla, a faith of pure devotion that appeals—the institutions of learning and fixity and religious dogma the poet can do without:

On the desperate scholar’s bedside table a jug
brimming over with questions.
I saw a mule bent under the burden of student compositions.
A camel slung with empty baskets of proverbs and axioms.
A dervish stumbling under the weight of his *dhikr*.

But everything in his spiritual search is not sunlight and melon rinds. There is real conflict, Sepehri points out, in resisting the natural urge toward the union of the individual and the natural, physical and spiritual universe:

A crack in the wall fights off the persistent advances
of the sunlight.
Stairs struggling against the Sun’s long leg.
Loneliness fights the song.
Pears wanting to fill the empty basket.
Pomegranate’s jewel-seeds refusing to burst
under the teeth’s insistence.

[...]

Forehead presses down against the cold clay prayer tablet.

Mosque tiles unpeel from the walls,
flying toward defenseless worshipers.

[...]

Butterfly-army takes on the Pest Control Program.
Dragonfly-swarm versus Water Main Workers.
Regiments of calligraphy pens storm the printshop
assaulting the leaden fonts
Poetry clogs up the throat of the poet.

Not only is a worshiper laying his forehead on an actual clay tablet (rather than, for example, a melon rind) equated with other examples of failure, but the worshipers inside an actual mosque (unlike those frolicking in the meadow, for example) have something real to fear! (Let me point out that this poem was published in 1964, a little before the image of the tiles unraveling from a mosque's dome to kill the worshipers inside became actual tragic reality.) In other skirmishes the butterflies and insects and calligraphy pens actually take on and take down the instruments of "civilization."

In another litany closely following this one, the natural world and the devoted poet do not fare so well:

A baby's rattle murdered on the mattress.
A story killed at the alley-opening of sleep.
Sorrow executed by order of song.
Moonlight shot at command of neon-lit night.
Willow tree strangled by order of the government.
Desperate poet murdered by a snowdrop flower.

The poet is seeking to find his place in the world and is not naïve about the complications of so doing. He knows that the world of order, the civilized world of timetables and train schedules and commerce is not the

same as the poetic world, the world of devotion and ecstasy. Repeating the poem's opening lines, he clarifies: "From Kashan I am but there I was not born / I have no place of origin. // With fevered devotion I built a house on the far side of night."

He knows, even though there is difficulty, he is on the side of wildness and mystery: "I have never seen two spruce trees at war. / Never seen the willow subletting its shade to the earth. / The elms offer their branches to the crows rent-free." He knows that through a real embrace of these converging and supposedly oppositional forces an individual human can truly experience the richness of the world, even death:

Let's eat bread and mallow flowers for breakfast.
Let's plant a sapling in the lilt and pitch of each word and line.
Let's sow silence between each syllable.
Ignore all the storm-free books and the book
in which the dew is not wet

[...]

We don't want the fly to be buffeted by the hands of the wind.
We don't want the tiger to pass through Creation's door
and disappear.
Without the worm, we would be hollow.
Repeal all the laws of trees if they deny the slithering caterpillar.
What would our clenching hands hold on to if there was no death?

The closing of the poem sheds all of his doubts. He's desperate after all, to soak himself in the rain, to "take the pulse of the flowers," and to come to terms once and for all, with Death. He writes:

Let's not be in dread of death.
Death is not the end of the dove or cricket.
Death constantly occupies the thoughts of the acacia trees.
Death dwells pleasant in the mind's meadows.
Death recounts the story of Dawn to the townsfolk at night.
Death slides inside my mouth when I eat the sunwarm grape.

Death quivers inside the robin's voice-box.
Death inked that calligraphy on the butterfly's wings.
Death sometimes harvests basil, drinks vodka,
sits in the shade watching.

Every deep breath is filled with the air of Death.

And so the poet is left with an awareness of both sides of life, but also aware that the human intellect is not equipped to understand the spiritual mysteries of existence and that only with poetic faculties can one hope to truly live:

Let's let Loneliness sing its song, write a poem,
go out into the streets.

Let's forget about everything.
Forget everything when at the bank teller's window
and when lounging under the sycamore.

Our mission is not to unpetal the rose's layered secret.
Maybe our mission is to float, drunk on the mystery of the rose.
Let's pitch our tents on the other side of the hill from Knowing.
Wash our hands in the leaf's green ecstasy and prepare the picnic.
Let's be reborn when the sun dawns.
Let's unleash everything and water the flowers and
rinse the windows, water and rinse our understanding of space,
sound and color.

Let's stitch Heaven between the two syllables of Being.
Fill and refill our lungs with eternity.
Unload the swallow of its burden of knowledge.
Let's strip all the names from the clouds, sycamore,
mosquito, summer

Let climb up the wet blue rungs of rain
higher and higher into Love

Let's open all the doors to every being, to sunlight,
to the green trees and gardens,
to the dragonflies and cicadas and other winged creatures

Maybe our real mission is to run between
the lotus flower and the century, hunting
for an echo of truth...

In the end, Sepehri created a haunting epic of the individual spirit's journey, informed by wild surrealism as well as a Sufi sensibility. The Hindu or Vedantic sense of death as a transformation or a realization haunts the text as do Zen and Buddhist ideas about the interconnectedness of all things.

Sepehri himself seems to have influenced a deep strand in contemporary poetry in the Middle East. Now, after having translated this poem into the very skin of my body, I hear Sepehri everywhere: in Darwish, in Kaminsky, even backwards in time in Dickinson.

Where before he dreamed of sowing silence, by the poem's end it is Heaven itself the poet is stitching into the words of existence. Leaving "Knowing" and "knowledge" behind (which, interestingly enough, here belongs to the birds and donkeys and goats but not to humans), Sepehri wishes like Gertrude Stein to peel names away from the things in the world so we can experience them anew without the burden of past association. This too is an idea drawn directly from the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, the idea that humans can achieve clear perception only by union with the divine.

What were only lotus seeds earlier in the poem have bloomed into flowers and rather than being a point of revelation themselves they are, like the Black Stone, only the beginning of a journey that—like Hagar in legend running seven times between the hills of Safa and Marwa in her impossible panic-driven search for water in the desert—the poet must enter his poem to undertake.

Mahwash Shoaib

LAHORE IN LYRICS

When my family moved to Lahore from Islamabad in 1983, it was as if all my senses awakened. Lahore was lyric set in motion, life so pungent, I wrote my first poem in Urdu. After learning the requisite Urdu poems in elementary school, the first *ghazal* I had to memorize was by Mirza Ghalib, “*Dil e nadaan tujhe hua kya hai / akhir iss dard ti dua kya hai.*” The teacher explained the rhyme and refrain pattern of the *ghazal*, and that God and love, equally mysterious for a ten-year old, were the *ghazal*’s themes. The metrical perfection and simple melody of the couplets made the poem mnemonic (I still remember the tune!) and even then I could understand the lyrical hide and seek games the poet played:

Foolish heart, what has happened to you?
Does this pain, after all, have no cure?

We long for her, and she weary
God, what does this mean!

I too have a tongue,
if only you asked me what I desire!

When nothing exists without You
then, Lord, why this commotion?

We hope for loyalty from her
who does not know what loyalty is

Yes, do good, it will do good for you
What else is the dervish’s call?

I concede, Ghalib is nothing
but if he comes free, then what’s the harm? ¹

On the other hand with its dense diction was Muhammad Iqbal's *ghazal*, which I had to learn for the end of my school years: "*Kabhi a haqiqat e muntazir nazar a libaas e mijaz mei / keh hazaron sajday tarap rahay hein meri jabeen e nayaz mei*" ("O awaited Reality, appear in mortal robes some time / for thousands of prostrations await on my humble forehead"). The poem evoked a belief—still ubiquitous among Pakistanis—that kept the path to Truth personal and inclusive; the final couplet for me was a mark of faith that finds strength even in skepticism: "*Jo mein sar basajda hua kabhi to zamin se ane lagi sada / tera dil to hai sanam ashna tujhe kya mile ga namaz mei*" ("If I ever prostrated myself, a call came from the earth, / Your heart is idolatrous, what will you get in prayers?"). At the end of the long summer days in Ramzan when we could hear the *müezzin* burping surreptitiously between the call to break the fast, *qawwalis* (Sufi devotional music) lasting from 10-20 minutes on the state-run Pakistan Television (PTV) became solace for any doubts and aches of the day. The long-tressed Sabri Brothers *qawwal*, would let loose in outbursts of improvisations and chant verses from Sufi poets: "*Bhar do jholi meri ya Muhammad / lot kar mein na jaoon ga khali*" ("Fill my lap O Muhammad / I will not return empty-handed").

Because repression was so complete, it didn't completely filter through that we were living under a dictatorship. And yet, despite the censorship that General Zia promoted on PTV, I remember a swirling web of words and music from the 1980s. Amid the pirated and mixed pop ditties of Madonna, Alamgir, Wham, Nazia & Zohaib, Michael Jackson, it is the alternately stately and coquettish classically-trained divas I remember—Noorjehan, Iqbal Bano, Farida Khanum, Tassawar Khanum—who familiarized a whole generation with mellifluous *ghazals*. The logically tuneful *ghazals*, recollected in tranquility, imparted new worlds to the listener. Younger singers like Tina Sani and Abida Perveen would provide further lyrical dimensions: "*Rang batein karein aur baton se khushboo aey / Dard phoolon ki tarhan mehka agar tu aey*" ("Colors talk and fragrance comes from speech / Pain will be scented like flowers, if you come").

On the long car trips from Lahore to Jhang, my father's hometown, I was truly introduced to the breadth and sublimity of *sufiana kalam* (Sufi verse). Not only was most of the *kalam* in vernacular Seraiki (the sweetest language in the world, according to my parents), it was delivered by Pathanay Khan, who sung with such pathos that he could transport his listeners to ecstatic realms. One of his most famous renderings was a *kafi* (a *qasida*-like poem about spiritual longing and union) by the Sufi poet Ghulam Farid: “*Meinda ishq vi toon, meinda yaar vi toon / meindi din vi toon, eiman vi toon*” (“You are my passion, You are my companion / You are my faith, You are my creed”). Not only were the *kalam* in regional languages a part of our daily lives, they were sung and recited at seasonal *melas* (festivals), *darbars* (shrines) of the Sufi saints (Lahore alone had about fifty-three tombs and shrines), weddings, public and private get-togethers. The ever-versatile Abida Perveen, with her expansive vocal range, used the improvisational techniques of the *qawwali* form in her rendition of Sufi lyrics that have remained popular for six centuries: written in Hindvi (the precursor of Urdu), the infectious “*Chhaap tilak sab chheeni / neerey mosay nena milaey ke*” was by the thirteenth-century Indian poet, musician and scholar Amir Khosrow, disciple of the Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya,

Just a Glance, and you have stolen my looks, my identity
 Just a Glance, I am drunk on your love-potion
 Just a Glance, you hold tight my fair arms with their green bangles
 Just a Glance, O dyer of clothes, and I am dyed in your love
 Just a Glance, I give myself to you, O Nizam, you have made me your bride

When 1988 ended with the demise of Zia and the arrival of democracy, the whole nation exhaled with relief, no matter how brief. There was a renaissance of formerly-suppressed leftist poets and verses of Faiz Ahmed Faiz were on everyone's lips, especially as Tina Sani sang in her mellow voice: “*Bol ke lab azad hein terey / Bol zaban ab tak teri hai*”

Speak, for your lips are yet free;
 Speak, for your tongue is still your own;
 Your lissome body yours alone;
 Speak, your life is still your own.
 Look into the blacksmith's forge:
 The flame blazes, the iron's red;
 Locks unfasten open-mouthed,
 Every chain's link springing wide.
 Speak, a little time suffices
 Before the tongue, the body die.
 Speak, the truth is still alive;
 Speak: say what you have to say. ²

Imagine the joy of finally watching old telecasts of veteran Iqbal Bano singing Faiz's immortal "*Dasht e tanhai*" in her voluptuous voice, with many prominent poets sitting in the private audience:

Even in this desolate wilderness
 They shimmer still—
 The images etched by your words
 The delicate tracery of your lips
 And flowering still among the dead dry leaves of distance
 The jasmine and rose of the nearness of you
 Here, quietly smoldering, the incandescence of your presence
 Simmering still in its own perfume gently, gently
 And beyond the horizon, glittering drop by hesitant drop
 The honey-dew of a loving look
 With what infinite sweetness the thought of you
 Brushes the countenance of memory
 As if even now in the first dawn of parting
 The day is done and it is the bright night of love ³

For all the *sufiana kalam* written from the perspective of lovelorn women and for all the gender shifting of personae in *ghazals* by male poets, what was missing from school syllabi were actual women poets. In my eighth grade, a progressive teacher recited "*Mein kon hoon?*" ("Who am I?") by radical poet Kishwar Naheed about a woman who refuses to be commodified in the name of tradition and love:

I am not that woman
Selling you socks and shoes!
Remember me, I am the one you hid
In your walls of stone, while you roamed
Free as the breeze, not knowing
That my voice cannot be smothered by stones,

I am the one you crushed
With the weight of custom and tradition
Not knowing
That light cannot be hidden in darkness.
Remember me,
I am the one in whose lap
You picked flowers
And planted thorns and embers
Not knowing
That chains cannot smother my fragrance

I am the woman
Whom you bought and sold
In the name of my own chastity
Not knowing
That I can walk on water
When I am drowning.

I am the one you married off
To get rid of a burden
Not knowing
That a nation of captive minds
Cannot be free.

I am the commodity you traded in,
My chastity, my motherhood, my loyalty.
Now it is time for me to flower free.
The woman on that poster, half-naked, selling socks and shoes-
No, no, I am not that woman! ⁴

After a decade of inertia, it was as if our minds were being liberated through words, our past catching up with our present. Lahoris were brash, open-hearted, syncretic, chance verses spilling even from the backs of rickshaws and buses—the future was full of hope.

Najwa Adra

SINGING THEIR MINDS

“Why do you stay with him?” I asked my friend who was complaining about her quarrelsome husband again. We were in the beautiful valley of al-Ahjur, about forty kilometers northwest of San‘a’, Yemen’s capital, where I was conducting ethnographic fieldwork. Divorce and serial marriage are quite common in this rural community, so I did not understand why my friend didn’t simply ask for divorce.

Her response floored me: “I refused seven suitors before I agreed to marry him.” I had been told that young women had no choice in marriage partners; who they married was decided entirely by their fathers. And, armed with multiple stereotypes about gender in the Middle East, I accepted these statements at face value.

“How did you refuse?”

“I used to sing my feelings as I ground grain by hand, and my parents would hear me and act accordingly.”

I had heard women singing in the fields, and, wherever they worked I heard men chanting and sometimes singing as well. But I had not paid attention to the lyrics. When I asked what people were singing about, they simply said, “Songs.” So I had only collected the lyrics of songs related to agricultural work and those sung for relatives on pilgrimage to Mecca. After this conversation, I began asking about other songs.

I found out that women compose and/or improvise two to four line poems that they sing as they work. Many of these are about the family situation of the poet—her joys and sorrows; others are love songs. If a woman is unhappy with her husband or a relative’s behavior, she will sing about this. If she misses her migrant son or brother or husband, she will sing her sorrow. If she quarrels with someone, she may sing her side of the issue. And, as we have seen, if an unmarried woman is unhappy with a suitor, she will make her wishes known through song.

Like most poetry, these songs are ambiguous. Someone not familiar with the singer's situation will not necessarily grasp their underlying references. But they are composed to be understood by close relatives and friends who are in a position to intervene in her favor.

Examples of rural women's poetry include the following love song:

*Yā ḥabīb yā labīb || Ayn a'milak wa ayn ajībak?
In 'amiltak fawq rāsī al-shumūs taḍirrak
Wa in 'amiltak fī 'iyūnī al-ḥufūf taghamak
A'milak waṣṭ jaībī wa aqūl innī laqaytak*

(Oh, love, oh one deserving of praise || Where shall I put you and
where shall I take you?
If I put you on top of my head, the sun will harm you
If I put you in my eyes, the eyelashes will blindfold you
I'll put you in my pocket and say that I found you) ¹

For another perspective on love:

*Lā darayt lā darayt || Inna—l-maḥibba tubbakī
Lā qad ta'awal't bi ibn al-nās || Wa la maḥant nafsī*

(Had I known, had I known || That love leads to tears
I would not have loved the son of man || Nor subjected myself to
affliction)

After a quarrel with her in-laws, a friend of mine sang:

*Gad kuntu 'ind ummī mishgir mighyal
Dhal ḥīn 'ind al-nās galbī tghayyar*

(When I lived with my mother I was a sprig of basil in water
Now [that I live] with others [in-laws] my heart has turned [bitter].)

A song about an absent son who does not write or call his parents is:

Gilt ibnī ibnī galbī ‘alayk ‘āṭish
Sa‘-l-ḥanash ḥīn yiltawī wa mā bish

(I said, my son, my son, my heart thirsts for you
Like the [thirsty] snake that turns round and round in place without
finding any [water].)

A good verse calls on the support of the community. A woman complaining about her marriage sang:

Lā tingidūnī lā kharijt wa-bṭayt
Min al-haram w-aldahs dākhil al-bayt

(Do not blame me for going out and staying away
From the nagging and misery inside the house.)

Women are not the only ones in Yemen who communicate their feelings through poetry. For all Yemenis, men and women, poetry is considered the proper medium with which to publicly express deep feelings of sorrow, joy and concern. Disputes are often mediated through poetry, as Steven Caton has shown in his publications. (See, for example, *‘Peaks of Yemen I Summon:’ Poetry as Cultural Practice in a North Yemeni Tribe.*)

Many intellectuals in the East and in the West tend to belittle poetry and song as worthless play. Yet linguists, such as Roman Jakobson of the early to mid-twentieth century and today’s Steven Caton, Richard Bauman, and Charles Briggs, among others, have shown that the framing of poetry makes it an ideal form to resolve conflict. When people hear a song, they first pay attention to its tune, its rhymes, and the clever arrangement of its words and puns. It is only later that they ponder the song’s underlying message. This process softens an angry message and opens up communication about sensitive topics. Also, a poem synthesizes the issue at hand and allows for disagreement without confrontation. Its beauty increases an opponent’s willingness to compromise. So saying

something through song or poetry is not a sign of weakness but a skilful use of an advanced form of communication that is highly effective in the mediation of conflict. In Arab societies, confrontation is not appreciated. If adult men or women say something in anger, listeners tend to pay more attention to the hostility than to the message. So poetry, which expresses disagreement in beautiful language, is more socially acceptable, thus more likely to be effective.

Moreover, these forms of expression contradict stereotypes that portray Muslim women as silent victims of an undefined patriarchy. The singer's heartfelt verse can be understood as positive goal-oriented behavior. Her songs signal an active engagement with issues of concern to women. They are not the words of silent victims but of assertive women who feel empowered to speak (or sing) their minds.

There is evidence that short poems were composed and sung regularly among rural populations of the Middle East and North Africa. These practices are dying out in Yemen, as they have elsewhere. Economic change, access to television, school curricula that ignore local folklore, and imported conservative interpretations of Islam that denounce women's "voice" are all contributing to the demise of this tradition.

Change happens everywhere, all of the time, so the loss of a poetic tradition is not surprising. But this is an unfortunate loss for two reasons: synthesizing feelings into poetry that is not overtly insulting is an exercise in critical thinking. Children who learn such skills from their parents and other relatives tend to grow up to be assertive rather than aggressive.

Furthermore, for women, the loss of their poetic tradition signals a loss of empowerment. Female seclusion is the ideal in this region—it is the upper social strata who have the privilege of staying at home and veiling when they go out. Historically only urban women were secluded. In contrast, gender mixing is the rule in *rural* Yemen, where women work in the fields and herd animals. In the past, they participated in poetic exchange with men, and they expressed their opinions freely, not only

about domestic issues but about community concerns and international politics, as well. When these practices are disdained for being “old-fashioned” or worse, when women’s voices are labeled “impious,” a major source of women’s empowerment is threatened. Ironically, young rural women today consider it fashionable and sophisticated to veil, and are less likely than their mothers to express their opinions openly. Although they enjoy the benefits of formal education, they are, in many ways, less empowered than their mothers, who actively participated in community life through their work and their songs.

To return to my friend who first introduced me to this poetic genre, thirty years later she is still married to her husband, and they still quarrel every week.

Steve Caton

YEMEN'S GIFTS

Before I came to Yemen in 1979, I had scant love for the poetic word in my own language, English. The novel, short story, and play—yes—but poetry left me cold.

Why then did I decide to make this the subject of my dissertation research (specifically the art of performing poetry among the sedentary tribes of Yemen)? I had been studying Arabic for two years at the University of Chicago and preparing for a Ph.D. dissertation in anthropological linguistics that required me to connect speaking or communication with society and culture in some way. Everything I had read about this part of the world and everything I heard or saw after I got there—which at first was Saudi Arabia, not Yemen—confirmed poetry's centrality in the social lives of Arabs. A new poem was printed daily in the newspaper's culture and arts section; a television broadcast of the king's return from a trip abroad had a segment of a tribal poet singing his praises; a taxi driver listened to poetry on tapes while stuck in a traffic jam; as soon as a new anthology of poetry hit the bookstores, it would be sold out before I could get my hands on it; the lyrics I heard sung by the greatest of all Arab singers at that time, Umm Kulthum, were composed by leading poets; a poetry recitation was more common at the universities than a public lecture: these anecdotes reveal how deeply poetry permeated everyday life.

My original intention had been to live among the Al Murra Bedouin in the northern fringes of the Empty Quarter, a Saudi Arabian tribe that had already been studied by an anthropologist, Donald Cole, who encouraged me to examine their *nabati* poetry, but I was never able to secure government approval for such a project. A friend suggested Yemen as a possible field site instead, especially as its tribes were more independent

of government control and less touched by Western influences. I flew to Yemen and fell in love with the country. As it turned out, it would become my home and research site for the next three years, from 1979-1981.

Not that getting the fieldwork started or keeping it going once it was started was necessarily easy, but it was such a beautiful country and such an interesting time to be there that I somehow didn't mind the countless delays and many obstacles I encountered along the way. At least I had enough Arabic under my belt from my formal university training and conversational practice in Saudi Arabia to feel confident that I could tackle what seemed to my Yemeni acquaintances an impossible undertaking. "You want to understand tribal Arabic poetry? By God, I couldn't and it's my language." I explained about grammatical and lexical work and about phonetic transcription and interlineal translation. Thank God for the tape recorder that allowed me to capture performances on the fly and for patient assistants like my friend Muhammad whom I befriended six months into my fieldwork and who helped me understand what was chanted on the tapes. In truth, I should have listened to the warnings of how hard the whole thing would be, but then if I had, I might not have gone through with what would be the most fascinating thing I have ever done in my life.

There was the question of where I should concentrate my research and I was told by a Yemeni friend of Khawlan al-Tiyal, a region that stretched from just east of the capital city San'a', to the outskirts of the city of Ma'rib, once the seat of power of the fabled Queen of Sheba, where I would find tribal poets and poetry more abundant than the "rain that falls in the monsoon season," a favorite line of verse. I settled there in a *hijrah* village, populated by descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, hence a sacred and protected enclave, and from there wandered on foot to neighboring tribal villages to meet poets and collect their work as well as to tape and observe poetic performances composed at wedding ceremonies and religious festivals.

I discovered the poetic genre called the *zamil*, a pithy two-line poem that is a veritable fisherman’s knot of meter and rhyme, composed on the spot at the groom’s wedding procession, at religious festivals celebrating the end of Ramadan and the Hajj, and in dispute mediations.

*ḥayd at-ṭiyal a’lan wa nādā kulla shāmikh f-il-yaman ||
mā bā najamhur gat wa-lā nafnā min ad-dunyā khalāṣ*

*lā’ yirja’ ams al-yōm w-illa sh-shams[a] tishrig min ‘adan ||
w-al-arḍ tish’al nār w-imzān as-samā tamṭur raṣāṣ*

“Mount at-Tiyal,” he summoned, and he cried out to every peak in Yemen; || “We will never become a republic, even if we were to be snuffed out of this world forever;

Even if yesterday were to return today and the sun were to rise in the south; || Even if the earth were to burn up in fire and the clouds of the sky rain bullets.”¹

Many such poems were recited to me from memory and some went back at least fifty years or more in Yemeni history, but most of them I transcribed from performances I taped in the specific social setting for which they were composed.

More exciting than the *zamil* was the *balah* poem, a long ode composed collectively by a group of poets for the entertainment of the groom on his wedding night. This was not the epic poetry of *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey* with their warriors and gods, their battles and tragedies, though their use of formulae (set pieces of metered verse quickly and efficiently assembled into poetic lines) was also a hallmark of the *balah* and made possible its so-called spontaneous composition. A circle of men would begin by chanting a refrain line so that the poets would have set in their minds the melody on which they had to deliver their original verse. Then a poet would enter the circle and chant the first line of the poem, an invocation of Allah and one of the many names by which He is described (the All-

Knowing, the Merciful, the Great, the One). This offering sets the meter and rhyme of the poem which poets who take their turn at composition must imitate correctly or else the chorus or the audience will disqualify them by shouting “A broken line!” Other speech acts follow including blessings on the Prophet Muhammad and greetings to the assembled wedding guests until the main event begins, a jousting or teasing routine between two or more poets in which the poet who has been challenged by a line has to come up with an answer that is wittier or more beautiful. Any subject is fair game. For example, if someone has built a chicken coop that is attracting too many flies to the village, he is likely to be challenged in verse about it and required to respond—in the prescribed meter and rhyme of course.

The progress I was making seemed too good to be true and sure enough, just as I was beginning to collect *qasida* poetry, the work of especially talented individuals, a dispute broke out between the *hijrah* and a neighboring village that not only embroiled the two of them in a nasty conflict but threatened to upset the political stability of Khawlan as a whole. I was in danger, too, and crestfallen that I had to leave just as my fieldwork was picking up steam. Ironically, though, had this dispute not occurred, I probably would not have understood or appreciated the rhetorical role of poetry in dispute mediation. All three genres I had studied were suddenly mobilized to discuss the dispute and analyze it from myriad angles, and I saw a side of poetry unimaginable in my own culture. And suddenly I realized that I was caught or smitten as surely as if I had fallen in love.

It was perhaps the most profound of the many gifts Yemen bestowed on me, for I returned to my own society with an affection for the poetic and the spoken I had not known before but which has not left me since.

Ammiel Alcalay

A P L A C E F O R P O E T R Y

In 1951, American poet, scholar and thinker Charles Olson applied for a Fulbright Fellowship to go to Iraq and study Sumerian civilization. He had just been to the Yucatan where, as an amateur archaeologist armed with a dizzying array of knowledge and an extraordinary amount of intuition, he uncovered aspects of Mayan civilization that hadn't yet been fully considered. His initial insights were most cogently expressed in correspondence with friend and fellow poet Robert Creeley, published as the *Mayan Letters*. Olson's plan was to join these two ancient civilizations through poetry, to see where Old and New Worlds met and how Native Americans and Ancient Near Easterners shared the cosmos, in order to redefine what it means to be human in the present. But Olson's application was rejected and, after a visitation from the FBI at Black Mountain College where he was teaching, he wrote Creeley, "I did say to you that I doubted State would take a risk on me at such outposts of the empire as Istanbul or Teheran, simply, that in such places, they can't afford more than pink-cheeked servants." I'm convinced that if Olson had lived in a world where he *could* have gotten a Fulbright to Iraq, our cultural history might look very different. Maybe we wouldn't have Burger King and Pizza Hut serving the Tallil Air Base in Iraq, a huge American project whose construction completely compromised what was, perhaps, the world's most significant archaeological site, the heartland of human civilization near Ur. But the rejection came at the height of the Cold War, after Olson had left a promising career in academia and party politics to become, of all things, a poet, but a poet who forged what he called "a curriculum of the soul" to combat the relentless administration of knowledge characterizing concepts of education within the military-industrial complex.

1951 was also the year my parents, refugees from Yugoslavia who had survived the war in Italy, settled in Boston. From Boston, they made their way to Gloucester where Olson became a family friend. My father, a painter, moved from an intense expressionism to immersion in a new environment as his painting became more and more abstract. In his studio he played all kinds of music, including Middle Eastern music. Our family mythology recalled roots in Spain, and dispersion throughout the Ottoman Empire and Mediterranean region following the expulsion of both Jews and Muslims in the fifteenth century. Dissatisfied with my purported “education,” I sought out sources in the worlds of classical Arabic and Islamic civilization. Growing up around abstract art, Islamic art made perfect sense to me; listening to John Coltrane, Middle Eastern musical modes sounded just right. Later, after years of study, I realized that our family roots in Spain must have had earlier traces in Iraq, following western migration to the new Caliphate.

But throughout, from my initial forays to the present, it has been the poetry of that part of the world I’ve been drawn to, not simply for its beauty and innate qualities, but for the enormous cultural space it occupies. In the United States, a major figure like Charles Olson, someone who should be generally known in the culture, remains obscure. Yet I have had heated conversations with Egyptian and Moroccan taxi-drivers regarding nuances in the work of the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. And this is not at all unusual in a world where poetry remains part of a shared inheritance, a valued form of expression and communication, a vessel through which many feelings of both past and present can be channeled. This was evident, for example, during the overthrow of the Mubarak regime in Egypt where demonstrators, following a long tradition, went into the streets armed with couplets.

I will never forget passing through London in 1987 right after the assassination of Palestinian cartoonist Naji al-Ali, months before the outbreak of the first Intifada, a popular movement that certainly lives in the memory not just for its pain and suppression but for its poetry and possibility, setting an example for what people might do when they lead

themselves. There was a memorial held at a gallery space associated with al-Saqi Books, and I got wind that the Iraqi poet Buland al-Haydari was to be present. In Jerusalem, where I had been living with my wife for several years, I was immersed in stories about al-Haydari from our good friend Nissim Rejwan, the Iraqi born writer and journalist. In the late 1940s Nissim had been the manager of Baghdad's al-Rabita Bookshop, a place and time he describes with remarkable poignancy in his memoirs, for it was in the bookshop that figures forming the nucleus of Iraq's Modernist movement gathered. Given the strict barriers imposed by the political situation, Nissim found himself completely cut off from the familiar world of his youth but, every now and then, he read something in the Arab press that recalled those days. In an interview Nissim found in a Beirut weekly, al-Haydari recalled: "We used to frequent al-Rabita Bookshop, where we met a Jewish intellectual by the name of Nissim Rejwan, who used to make typed copies of any book of poetry that reached the store and sell it to us at a cheap price. Among those books I remember T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*."

While Nissim disputed the accuracy of this memory, claiming no one had time to make typewritten copies of books back then, I was still charged with the task of conveying what were supposed to be greetings but actually amounted to over 35 years of longing for a life in which poetry and friendship across religious or ethnic lines was simply natural, part of everyday life. Although I was only a vessel at that point, the look of recognition in al-Haydari's eyes conveyed an extraordinary sense of grace in the knowledge that at least some form of communication with his long lost friend was possible. It is this sense of recognition that lies at the heart of a conception of poetry that takes up so much cultural space, in which the accumulation of meaning remains alive to be rekindled. As the poet Adonis writes: "When there is no poetry in a period of history, there is no true human dimension. Poetry, according to this definition, is more than a means or a tool, like technology: it is, rather, like language itself, an innate quality. It is not a stage in the history of human consciousness but a constituent of this consciousness."

Reza Aslan

LITERATURE'S REVOLUTIONS

On New Year's Eve, 1977, President Jimmy Carter traveled to an Iran on the brink of revolution to toast the reign of Muhammad Reza Shah, the country's American-backed dictator, as "an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world." Two years after that fateful evening, the Iranian Revolution overthrew the Shah and, ultimately, led to the end of Jimmy Carter's presidency.

Three decades later, historians are still asking how it was that the leader of the free world could not have recognized what everyone in Iran knew to be true: that the island of stability the president spoke of was in fact a volcano about to erupt—one whose shockwaves would be felt all over the world. The simple answer to this question is that, when it came to Iran, Carter's views—and indeed those of much of the West—were formed almost exclusively through communication with Iran's leaders, and not with Iranians themselves. This is understandable, of course, as the Shah's dictatorial rule did not allow the voices of common Iranians to be heard, and the White House was expressly forbidden to communicate with anyone in the Iranian opposition. Yet had Carter read the poetry of Ahmad Shamlu or Reza Baraheni, had he been exposed to the explosive political tracts of Jalal Al-e Ahmad or delved into the provocative short stories of Hushang Golshiri and Sadeq Chubak, chances are he never would have made that foolish New Year's toast, and history may have turned out quite differently.

Anyone who has traveled to the countries of the Middle East surely has experienced the wide chasm of opinion, values, and aspirations that separates the people of the region from their religious and political leaders. This is a part of the world in which severe limitations on the freedom of speech and government influence over the press often makes

it difficult for outsiders to form a well-rounded and informed view of what people truly believe and want for themselves and their countries.

This fundamental truth is being proved once more on the streets of Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, and beyond, where literature has become a tool of revolution. The young people gathered in Tahrir Square in Central Cairo chanted the verses of the famed Egyptian poet Ahmad Fu'ad Nigm, who gave voice to the voiceless in Egypt when he wrote:

Our silence is a sense
More eloquent than words
And everyone who's heard us
Knows exactly what we say ¹

And they won their fight to finally be heard.

In Tunisia, the poet Abu al-Qasim al-Shabi's celebrated poem, "To the Tyrant" became a rallying cry for the marginalized and dispossessed who were energized by the promise of al-Shabi's lines:

Imperious despot, insolent in strife,
Lover of ruin, enemy of life!...
A bloody torrent sweep you to your doom. ²

They, too, defeated the despot.

In Iran, the young people who have struggled so bravely for their rights and freedoms, and suffered so brutally for it, still recall the fighting words of Hamid Mosadiq's "Blue, Grey, Black," exhorting the righteous to never surrender:

If I rise,
If you rise,
Everyone will be roused.
If I sit,
If you take a seat,
Who will take stand?
Who will fight the foe,
Grapple the foul enemy hand to hand? ³

And they have not surrendered.

In countries where the voice of the people are stifled, where the only voices one hears are those of the powerful and elite, it is the poet who holds society's leaders to account for their failure to live up to their promises of peace and security. The poet becomes the journalist, the historian, the cultural critic, and literature becomes a mirror that reflects the ills and failures of society.

That is a lesson we have forgotten in the United States, where our freedoms have lulled us into a kind of literary stupor. But if we want to hold fast to those freedoms and pass them to the next generation, it is a lesson we should never forget.

GLOSSARY

balah — a chanted, improvised Arabic form in a fixed meter characteristic of northern Yemen performed in competition by two or more male poets with the participation of a chorus and its audience for the amusement of the groom during wedding festivities.

Black Stone of Mecca (*Al-ḥajar al-Aswad*) — a Muslim object of veneration built into the eastern wall of the Ka'ba, an ancient, stone shrine within the Grand Mosque of Mecca. The placement of the Black Stone dictates the direction in which Muslims pray.

dhikr — a ritual invocation and remembrance of God through prayer, song, or dance practiced by Sufis, Islamic mystics. Forms of *dhikr* vary from order to order and are meant to facilitate the attainment of physical and emotional states that promote spiritual transformation.

ghazal — a poetic form originating in seventh century Arabia from the prelude to the *qasida*. A *ghazal* is composed of five to fifteen structurally and thematically autonomous couplets. In its classical form, each line of the poem is of the same length with the first couplet introducing a scheme made up of a rhyme followed by a refrain. Themes often include love and longing as well as metaphysical questions. Jamil (Arabic), Rumi and Hafez (Persian), and Ghalib (Urdu) are considered masters of the form.

Hadith — the record of the traditions or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, revered and received as a major source of religious law and moral guidance, second only to the authority of the Qur'an.

Hijrah — the migration of the Prophet Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to the city of Yathrib, later renamed Medina, in 622. The Hijrah marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar, and *hijrah* villages are homes to the descendants of the Prophet and his original followers.

Ka'ba — the ancient, stone shrine within the Grand Mosque of Mecca which houses the Black Stone.

müezzin — a crier at a mosque who chants the hour of daily prayers and the call to prayer (*adhan*) at Friday services.

mushaira — a *mushaira* is an Urdu literary symposium where poets gather and recite their work, usually composed in *ghazal* and *nazm* form.

nabati — a type of Bedouin poetry native to the central and eastern regions of the Arabian Peninsula. It dates back to the sixteenth century and is composed in the dialect of the Peninsula rather than classical Arabic. Themes include the lover and the beloved, the desert, honor, leadership, and war.

Night Journey — recounted in both the Qur'an (Sura 17) and the Hadith, a two part journey that the Prophet Muhammad took during a single night around the year 621. According to Islamic tradition, Muhammad traveled on the mythological steed, Buraq, to Jerusalem, where he led other prophets—Abraham, Moses, and Jesus—in prayer (the Isra'). He then returned to Mecca and ascended into heaven where he spoke to God, who gave him instructions for the faithful about the number of times to pray each day (the Mi'raj).

qasida — one of the oldest and most prestigious forms of poetry in the Islamic world, the *qasida* was originally a long, mono-rhymed ode composed to praise, eulogize, or satirize in pre-Islamic, tribal Arabian society. As Islam spread, the form travelled with it and developed in North Africa, Central and South Asia, and—more recently—Southeast Asia. Though still used today in contexts as varied as televised political commentary and village weddings, the form reached its height in the grandiloquent work of the tenth century Arabic poet al-Mutanabbi.

qibla — the direction that a Muslim faces when he performs formal prayers, or *salah*. Most mosques contain a decorated wall niche, known as a *mihrab*, that indicates the *qibla*.

roba'i — with roots in the Persian pre-Islamic poetic tradition, the *roba'i* is a quatrain with a rhyme scheme a-a-b-a. The most well-known example of the *roba'i* is the twelfth century *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*.

Seraiki — a group of six Indo-Aryan dialects linguistically related to Punjabi and spoken by approximately 14 million people in eastern Pakistan and northwestern India.

Sufi — an Islamic mystic. Sufism was founded as an ascetic movement shortly after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century, and the now countless Sufi orders have spanned several continents and cultures—Arab,

Persian, Turkish, Urdu—for over a millennium. While most Muslims believe that they are on the pathway to God and will become close to God after the Final Judgment, Sufis also believe that it is possible to become close to God and to experience this closeness while one is still alive. As part of their spiritual journey (*tariqah*), Sufis have produced a body of artistic work ranging from the poems of Rumi to the *qawwali* songs of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan.

zamil — a chanted, improvised Arabic form in a fixed meter characteristic of northern Yemen similar to the *balah*, but performed by a single poet accompanied by refrains chanted by the poem's audience while marching in a procession during wedding festivities.

zibur — the Islamic term for the Biblical Psalms of David, referenced in the Qur'an.

NOTES ON TRANSLATIONS

LEE BRICCETTI

- ¹ “Window” by Forugh Farrokhzad, translated from the Persian by Sholeh Wolpé.
- ² “If my voice is not reaching you...” by Afzal Ahmed Syed, translated from the Urdu by Musharraf Ali Farooqi.
- ³ “The Beginning of the Book” by Adonis, translated from the Arabic by Khaled Mattawa.

PERSIS KARIM

- ¹ “Ah, my Beloved, fill the Cup that clears...” and “With the seed of Wisdom did I sow...” by Omar Khayyam, translated from the Persian by Edward FitzGerald.
- ² “Sin” by Forough Farrokhzad, translated from the Persian by Sholeh Wolpé.

KAZIM ALI

- ¹ *Water’s Footfall* by Sohrab Sepehri, translated from the Persian by Kazim Ali with Mohammad Jafar Mahallati.

MAHWASH SHOAI B

- ¹ Translations from the Urdu by Mahwash Shoaib except for those noted below.
- ² “Speak, for your lips are yet free...” by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, translated from the Urdu by Yasmin Hosain.
- ³ “*Dasht e tanhai*” by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, translated from the Urdu by Shoaib Hashmi.
- ⁴ “Who Am I?” by Kishwar Naheed, translated from the Urdu by Mahmood Jamal.

NAJWA ADRA

- ¹ Translations from the Arabic by Najwa Adra except “Do not blame me...” by Najwa Adra and Afrah Yusr.

STEVE CATON

- ¹ Translations from the Arabic by Steve Caton.

REZA ASLAN

- ¹ “Our silence is a sense...” by Ahmad Fu’ad Nigm translated from the Arabic by Marilyn Booth.
- ² “To the Tyrant” by Abu al-Qasim al-Shabi, translated from the Arabic by A.J. Arberry.
- ³ “Blue, Grey, Black” by Hamid Mosadiq, translated from the Persian by Sholeh Wolpé.

ESSAYISTS' BIOGRAPHIES

N A J W A A D R A is a cultural anthropologist who has conducted field research in Yemen since 1978. She has a grant from the American Institute for Yemeni Studies to transcribe and translate her collection of women's poetry with the help of Brooklyn's Afrah Yusr. In 2004, she curated a Yemeni poetry event, funded by City Lore, and was given a citation by the President of the Borough of Brooklyn for this work. In 2000-2003, she designed and piloted "Literacy through Poetry," funded by the World Bank and the Social Fund for Development in San'a' (www.najwaadra.net/literacy.html).

A M M I E L A L C A L A Y is a poet, translator, critic, and scholar who teaches at Queens College and the CUNY Graduate Center, where he is the Deputy Chair of the Ph.D. Program in English. His latest work is "*neither wit nor gold*" (*from then*) (Ugly Ducking Presse, 2011). He is also editor and translator of *Keys to the Garden* and Semezdin Mehmedinovic's *Sarajevo Blues*, both published by City Lights.

K A Z I M A L I's most recent books are *Fasting for Ramadan: Notes from a Spiritual Practice* and *Orange Alert: Essays on Poetry, Art and the Architecture of Silence*. Previous books include the novels, *Quinn's Passage* and *The Disappearance of Seth* and the volumes of poetry *The Far Mosque*, *The Fortieth Day*, and *Bright Felon: Autobiography and Cities*. With Mohammad Jafar Mahalatti, he translated *Water's Footfall* by Iranian poet Sohrab Sepehri. He is a founding editor of Nightboat Books and associate professor of Creative Writing at Oberlin College.

R E Z A A S L A N is the editor of the anthology *Tablet and Pen: Literary Landscapes from the Modern Middle East*, spanning the years 1910-2010 and showcasing the tumultuous changes in literary culture across the Middle East and South Asia. He is on the faculty at the University of California, Riverside and is a contributing editor for *The Daily Beast*. His books include the international bestseller, *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*, which has been translated into thirteen languages and named one of the 100 most important books of the last decade. He is also the author of *How to Win a Cosmic War*, published in paperback as *Beyond Fundamentalism: Confronting Religious Extremism in a Globalized Age*.

ST E V E C A T O N is a professor of anthropology at Harvard University and director of its Center for Middle Eastern Studies. He is the author of *Lawrence of Arabia: A Film's Anthropology*. He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts and New York City.

P E R S I S K A R I M is a poet and a professor of literature and creative writing at San Jose State University. Her poetry has been published in a number of literary journals including *Callaloo*, *Reed Magazine*, *Pale House*, *Atlanta Review*, and *Red Wheelbarrow*. She has published numerous articles about Iranian diaspora literature and culture and is the editor of two anthologies of Iranian diaspora literature: *Let Me Tell You Where I've Been: New Writing by Women of the Iranian Diaspora* (2006) and *A World Between: Poems, Short Stories and Essays by Iranian Americans* (1999). She is the founder and co-director of the Association of Iranian American Writers (www.iranianamericanwriters.org). She lives in Berkeley, California.

M A H W A S H S H O A I B is a poet, scholar, and translator; her work has appeared in small journals and anthologies. She received her doctorate in English on the transnational poetics of American and Asian poets. She is currently working on a book of translations and critical essays for a New York publisher about the Pakistani poet Kishwar Naheed.

ILLUMINATED VERSES EVENTS

SATURDAY, MARCH 19, 2:00 PM

Introduction to the Language of the *Qur'an*

A Seminar with Bruce Lawrence

Duke University professor Bruce Lawrence offers an introduction to the poetic style and aural beauty of the *Qur'an* and discusses the challenge of translating archaic Arabic into modern-day English.

THURSDAY, APRIL 21, 6:30 PM

A Prince's Manuscript Unbound: Selections from the Shahnamah

Director of the Tehran Theater Workshop Iraj Anvar performs selections of the *Shahnamah*, a sweeping epic poem composed by Ferdowsi, Persia's greatest poet of the 10th and 11th centuries. This event is held in conjunction with the Asia Society's exhibition of illuminated miniatures, "A Prince's Manuscript Unbound: Muhammad Juki's Shahnamah."

TUESDAY, APRIL 26, 7:00 PM

Transmutations with Moroccan Poet Mohammed Bennis

Born in 1948 in Fez, Morocco, internationally acclaimed poet and professor of Arabic poetry Mohammed Bennis reads from his work and discusses his life in poetry with Pierre Joris.

THURSDAY, APRIL 28, 7:00 PM

The Traveling Word: A West African Epic

Joined by West African Jali musicians, Kewulay Finah Kamara discusses, performs and screens segments from his documentary about his attempt to recreate an ancient oral epic after the only written copy was destroyed in Sierra Leone's recent Civil War.

SATURDAY, APRIL 30, 4:30 PM

Modern Poetry of Pakistan

Hasina Gul, a poet and broadcaster, joins Waqas Khwaja, translation editor of the anthology *Modern Poetry of Pakistan*, for a discussion of Pakistani poetry, including the challenges and pleasures of translating from the original for English language audiences. Gul will also read a selection of her poetry.

SATURDAY, APRIL 30, 8:00 PM

Mushaira: Celebrating Urdu Poetry

Celebrated poets from Pakistan recreate an intimate atmosphere of *mushaira*, a traditional gathering of poets who read or recite their work. English translation will be provided at the beginning of the program, followed by performances in Urdu.

TUESDAY, MAY 3, 7:00 PM

Precarious Lives: Arab Poets since Pre-Islamic Times

A Seminar with Muhsin al-Musawi

Often exiled or sold into slavery in ancient times, Arabic language poets have literally suffered for their art. Noted literary scholar Muhsin al-Musawi explores the dramatic biographies of poets writing in Arabic throughout history.

THURSDAY, MAY 5, 7:00 PM

From Tablet to Pen: The Literary History of Islam

A Seminar with Reza Aslan

Internationally acclaimed writer and scholar of religions, Reza Aslan gives an overview of the history of Islam and the different languages and poetic traditions in the Islamic world.

SATURDAY, MAY 7, 9:00 AM TO 6:15 PM

Bridging Cultures Conference

A series of scholarly panels on themes including the Arabic Golden Age; the Sufi tradition and lyric poetry in the Middle East and Persia; poetry and the “theater of violence”; the Urdu tradition from Mughal courts to modern Pakistan; 20th century literary revivals in North Africa; poetry and nation building; the relation of early forms of the blues and the Islamic call to prayer.

Participating Scholars and Poets: Rashidah Ismaili Abubakr, Najwa Adra, Ammiel Alcalay, Kazim Ali, Reza Aslan, Kaveh Bassiri, Clarissa Burt, Steve Caton, Sylviane Diouf, Syed Akbar Hyder, Pierre Joris, Persis Karim, Khaled Mattawa, Jawid Mojaddedi, Daniel Abdal-Hayy Moore, Stefania Pandolfo, Frances W. Pritchett, Michael Sells, Mahwash Shoaib, and Suzanne Stetkevych.

8:00 PM TO 10:00 PM

Verses Illuminated: Celebratory Reading and Performance

A multi-artist celebration of the poetic forms of the Islamic world featuring readings by participating poets and performances by Lebanese poetry duellists, the Iraqi group Safaafir singing songs from the cafes of Baghdad, vocalist Kiran Ahluwalia performing classical and contemporary *ghazals*, Rumi singer Amir Vahab, and much more.

ABOUT ILLUMINATED VERSES

ADVISORS

Najwa Adra
Ammiel Alcalay
Kazim Ali
Steve Caton
Pierre Joris
Khaled Mattawa

CITY LORE

Founded in 1986, City Lore's mission is to foster New York City—and America's—living cultural heritage. We work in four cultural domains: urban folklore and history, preservation, education, and grassroots poetry traditions. City Lore was inspired to create the *People's Poetry Gathering* with Poets House in 1999 to bring together folk, ethnic, inner city, and literary poets under one roof. The *Gathering* evolved into the *People's Poetry Project*, and City Lore has continued to explore global and New York City poetics with *The Poetry Dialogues*, *The Poetry Dinners*, the forthcoming POEMobile designed to project poems on to walls and buildings in tandem with live readings, and *Illuminated Verses: Poetries of the Islamic World* with Poets House as our longstanding partner.

POETS HOUSE

Poets House is a national poetry library and literary center that invites poets and the public to step into the living tradition of poetry. Poets House—through its poetry resources and literary events—documents the wealth and diversity of modern poetry and stimulates public dialogue on issues of poetry in culture. Founded in 1985 by poet Stanley Kunitz and arts administrator Elizabeth Kray, the over-50,000-volume library has created a home for *all* who read and write poetry. For more information about events and Poets House in general, visit www.poetshouse.org, and join us on Facebook and Twitter.



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Because democracy demands wisdom.



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