



*Wesleyan Poetry in Translation*

# *Desert Tracings*

Six Classic Arabian Odes

by ʿAlqama, Shánfara, Labíd, ʿAntara,  
Al-Aʿsha, and Dhu al-Rúmma

Translated and Introduced by

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To Janet

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## Introduction

### *The Arabian Ode*

Traces of an abandoned campsite mark the beginning of the pre-Islamic Arabian ode. They announce the loss of the beloved, the spring rains, and the flowering meadows of an idealized past. Yet they also recall what is lost—both inciting its remembrance and calling it back. To hear this poetry now is to experience a similar transformation: across expanses of time and place it is a voice at once immediate and profound.

The bedouin tribes of pre-Islamic Arabia are said to have held poetry competitions during the annual fair at 'Ukáz, near Mecca. The winning poems—seven in all, according to most accounts—were embroidered in gold on rare Egyptian cloth and suspended from the ancient shrine in Mecca known as the Ka'ba. The story has been dismissed by some as an attempt to explain the puzzling name of Arabia's most famous poetry collection, the *Mu'allaqât* (suspended ones).<sup>1</sup> Yet the Legend of the Hanging Odes may offer a deeper message as a sign of cultural self-understanding. The image of the seven odes suspended from Arabia's most sacred shrine, a shrine that has since become the ritual center of Arabic culture and of the multicultural world of Islam, mirrors the generative role within the Arabic-speaking world of the *Mu'allaqât* and a large number of equally great poems.

Although it had labeled pre-Islamic Arabia "the *Jahiliyya*" (period or place of moral ignorance), Islam never abandoned the poetic heritage of that era. In the first four centuries after the founding of the new religion in 622 C.E., in cities such as Basra, Kufa, Baghdad, and Aleppo, Muslim scholars collected and preserved the oral poetic tradition of Arabia, integrating it into written culture and into the new Islamic religious sensibility. From that time the deeper patterns of the ode—if not always its formal structure—have continued to inform the Arabic literary tradition and to influence non-Arabic literatures within the world of Islam.

The origin, authorship, and transmission of this poetry, so finely developed by the time of its recording, remain a mystery. Tradition suggests that the poetry was composed by individual authors, to whom it ascribes names and biographies, and then memorized and transmitted word for word by *râwîs* (rhapsodes) endowed with prodigious memories.<sup>2</sup> More recently some have suggested, following the oral-performance

model developed by Homeric scholars, that the roles of the poet and *rāwī* were intertwined: the *rāwī* did not memorize precomposed poems, but, after mastering thematic, lexical, and metrical possibilities, would compose the poem in the act of performing it.<sup>3</sup>

Another largely oral tradition, jazz, may offer an analogy. A song evolves with each performance. The artist learns its basic contours and then, building upon a rigorous apprenticeship in the expectations and possibilities of the tradition, performs it. The richest layering of tradition combines with the most striking spontaneity. Whether composed in the act of performance or precomposed before performance, or through some combination of the two, the early Arabian poem was not—or not only—memorized. It was remembered, recalled from out of a common sensibility and a common cultural gestalt.

The ode (*qasida*) is a poem seldom longer than 120 lines, composed in one of several possible meters, with a single end rhyme that remains the same throughout the poem. Its most distinctive feature is its division into three major thematic movements: the *nasīb* or remembrance of the beloved, the journey, and the boast.

The *qasida* opens onto the abandoned campsite—traces in the sand from rain trenches and tent pegs, blackened hearthstones, ruins (*atlāl*) left by the beloved's tribe. The traces are silent. Yet they invoke. As the poet stands before them the tension of this silent invocation demands release. This is the site and wellspring of the poem.

Remembrance takes a variety of forms: torrent beds paradoxically more apparent the more they are worn down; the absent beloved's night apparition (*tayf*) before the sleepless poet; the recounting of her shifting moods and affections (*ahwāl*); remembrance of her departure with the women of her tribe in their richly embroidered camel litters or howdahs; the recounting of the stations (*maqāmāt*) of her journey away from the poet; the black wing of the crow or the sorrowful moaning of the dove; the hoariness of a poet who looks back upon a lost youth. These and other themes and subthemes recur from poem to poem, with a measured, almost ritual solemnity. Yet in each poem they acquire a new configuration according to a subtle and always newly discovered logic of sorrow. Each new realization of loss generates a new poem, with its own circumstances, undertones, personality.

What presents itself as a description of the beloved is something very different. The simile dissembles. What occurs is not so much description as it is metamorphosis. Whenever we think we have the image pinned down, it changes. The beloved's mouth might be compared to wine as fresh as a cold stream, her grace to that of a gazelle, her eyes to the

eyes of a white oryx. In apparent digression the poetic voice outruns any descriptive point through the indefinite extension of the simile or through chains of similes. The images evoked—spring rains, flowing streams, flowering meadows, desert animals birthing or nursing in poses of idyllic tranquillity—are parts of a recalled wholeness. Within the dissembling simile and at odds with its explicit intent—as if the poetic voice were pulled along against its will—the archetype is re-collected, re-membered: beloved as lost garden or spring meadow.

Look again and there is no garden, only a deserted campsite. The companions, mentioned as present with the poet when the campsite was recognized as the beloved's, are gone. The poet who in the *nasīb* meditated on what he had lost, is now himself lost, beyond the margins of human community. He embarks on a journey marked by the perishing of locusts in the midday heat, the death call of the owl by night, the wasting away of the camel, the disequilibrium and terror of the mirage. As night falls, the rider's own image—the last human form—is enveloped by darkness.

The journey account can be displaced by the depiction of the rider's mount, the camel mare (*nāqa*). The *nāqa* can be displaced in turn by episodes involving other desert animals: the Arabian white oryx, an exquisitely graceful antelope with long, straight, cylindrical horns; the wild ass or onager, a cousin of the zebra; and the ostrich. These animals are introduced through similes likening the *nāqa* to them, but again the simile dissembles. The continued extension of the simile opens onto an independent animal episode, onto a semantic and symbolic field that stretches far beyond any descriptive similarity. The associations of the oryx (beauty, grace, fragility, giving birth, the beloved) are in fact precise opposites of those of the *nāqa* (strength, a quasi-elemental endurance, wasting away, tied udders, the self of the poet). Even as the simile proclaims the *nāqa* to be like the oryx, it extends in apparent digression into an independent vignette, revealing a more profound set of associative polarities.

The animals are called not by name, but by epithet: "red-legged clump-wing" for the ostrich, for example, or "sheen-of-udder," "wide-of-eyes," "wild one," "flat-nosed one," for the oryx. The more central its symbolic associations, the more epithets an animal will have.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the English and Homeric variety (rosy-fingered dawn, wine-dark sea), the Arabic epithet has no noun. It resembles English nomenclature for birds (red-breasted nuthatch), or horses (bay, chestnut), but for each animal there are hundreds of such terms. The animal is not so much described as it is performed. A generic term like oryx and a named object of description are replaced with an almost limitless possibility of meta-

phorical and metonymic marks, opening the figure onto a deeply textured world of semantic and symbolic play.

When the oryx doe is surrounded by hunters, we know she will escape. In an ostrich tableau, we can expect to find the male ostrich running back to the nest. These vignettes and metaphors and similes must have been honed and selected over generations according to the bedouin aesthetic and the subtle poetic logic of the ode. They take on a totemic solidity. Yet in suppleness of allusion and in the continual expansion and deepening of epithetic and symbolic association they achieve a remarkable sense of freedom.

The transition from the journey to the ode's final movement, the boast, often takes the form of a wine song. The wine and the song of the singing girl (*qáyna*), consolations for the loss of the beloved, contain a paradox common to many traditions: the more the poet drinks, the more he proclaims how well he has forgotten the beloved, and the more he proclaims, the more he belies his proclamation. This bacchic antinomy is at the heart of the ode as a whole. However much the *nasīb* may now be left behind, remembrance of the beloved haunts the poem, guiding and controlling the poetic voice.

The dramatic center of the boast is the *nāqa* sacrifice. The poet-hero slaughters his camel mare and distributes the meat through a ritual lottery (the *māysir*) played with arrow shafts. The *nāqa*'s association with the self of the poet is made explicit in the practice, mentioned in the boast, of the tying of his riding camel to the grave of the fallen hero. This connection as well as the symbolic importance of the *nāqa* to the preceding journey section charge the sacrifice. In the ode of Labid, the sacrifice marks the point at which the individual heroic boast of the poet merges with the tribal voice, the poem ending with a kind of tribal chant. In the ode of Tārafa the sacrifice goes wrong, ending with the poet's community split and his psyche split into mutually recriminating sides, one blaming, the other enraged, casting off the blame.<sup>5</sup> In the ode of the *su'lūk* (brigand-poet) Shānfara, the sacrifice occurs only in a metaphor, when the brigand-poet, cut off from all community, sees himself as the hamstrung *nāqa* carved up by the personifications of his many crimes. The long war of Basús, subject of many odes, was begun by the sacrilegious killing of a *nāqa*. The *nāqa* sacrifice is a ritual and poetic performance, sign and prediction of the precarious balance of the community and the vitality of its bonds.

Within the heroic battle-boast as an affirmation of human struggle is a meditation upon fate and the absurdity of the human condition. Two warring opponents or tribes exchange boasts and taunts. Yet within this personalized antagonism lies the suspicion that there is nothing

personal at all about an encounter guided and predetermined by the hands of fate—fate as time (*dahr*) that changes and wears down all things, and fate as allotted death (*manīyya*). As the battle-boast intensifies, the hierarchies of tribal society and the sense of self-identity that the boast is upholding begin to unravel from within. The moment of death in battle unmasks the truth that the poet-hero and his enemy, kin and non-kin, self and other, father and son, can no longer be distinguished. The warrior looks into the death grin of his antagonist and sees his own reflection.

The tripartite movement of the *qasida*, from *nasīb* through journey to the boast, bears a remarkable resemblance to models of the quest theme in folk tale and myth. One model divides the basic mythopoetic paradigm of Western literature into three acts: an initial Edenlike condition of blissfulness that exists only as a memory; the home-leaving or expulsion of the hero and his subsequent journey; re-creation or homecoming, a return not to the original blissful lack of conflict, but to a less ideal society transformed and criticized by the culture hero's own will, act, or sacrifice.<sup>6</sup> This pattern, so astonishingly similar to the tripartite pattern of the *qasida*, was developed by an author apparently unfamiliar with pre-Islamic poetry. More recently, a close reading of several key odes has demonstrated with philological and critical precision the parallels between the *qasida* and the tripartite pattern of the rite of passage: initial phase of separation; a liminal phase in which the "passenger" moves beyond the margins of human community and societal restraint; and a final reaggregation into a new, more mature social role.<sup>7</sup>

Though the *qasida* is based upon an archetypal pattern with universal resonances, it achieves a distinctive mythopoetic intensity in the modulation of that pattern through its own subtle and fluid conception of the sacred. Yet perhaps the most distinctive feature of this poetry is to be found in its poetics of thematic interpermeation, the functioning of a term, epithet, image, or vignette as a matrix for associations from other, thematically distinct sections. A simple example is Shānfara's comparison of the twanging of his bow to the wailing of a grief-stricken woman. This apparently descriptive simile calls up the major *topos* of death elegy, evoking themes of community and mourning at odds with the *su'lūk* boast's explicit thematic and rhetorical intent. Within the linear and irreversible progression through the major themes of the ode, other themes, movements, and moods are evoked as subtexts, counter-texts, and intertexts.

In its range of mood and mode (elegiac, lyric, bacchic, satirical, heroic, tragic, comic) and in its foundational role in subsequent literature, the

qasida in Arabic civilization would be equivalent to the full variety of classical Greek literary genres subsumed into one comprehensive genre.<sup>8</sup> Yet it has been given less attention in the West than later, less central works, such as the *Arabian Nights* cycle. From the perspective of our "histories of civilization," rooted in the equation of civilization with the *civitas* or city, it has seemed inconceivable that a few tribes of camel-breeding bedouin, largely illiterate, largely ignored by the surrounding civilizations of Rome, Persia, and Ethiopia-Yemen, would over the space of unrecorded generations, or centuries, create one of the masterworks of world literature, a highly articulate, metrically and semantically intricate, fully achieved poetic form that was to serve as the basis for the classical Arabic language, and as a foundation of one of humankind's major civilizations. This fact left in disbelief a century of Arabist and Islamicist scholarship, a disbelief only recently giving way to appreciative wonder.<sup>9</sup>

A further complication is the qasida's ambivalent place within Islam. The Qur'an appropriated many of the central values of pre-Islamic poetry. The role of the *karim* (the generous one) in the qasida, for example, is reflected by its similarly central role in the Qur'an, though its heroic and poetic context has been transformed. Despite such continuities, and despite the central influence of the qasida on many areas of Islamic literature, the qasida world is in tension, a creative tension, but no less a tension, with Islam. Upon arrival at the Ka'ba, the pilgrim finds the walls hung with tapestries of rare Egyptian cloth inscribed in gold. What appears there is not poetry, however, but passages from the Qur'an.

Here are six of the odes, in full, selected with a view toward both poetic quality and balanced representation of the tradition.<sup>10</sup> I have not imitated the complex meter and rhyme of the original, but have used cadence, as modulated through the line breaks, to re-create the original rhythmic texture formed by the play of syntax across the meter. The goal is a rendition of the poem in a natural, idiomatic, and contemporary American verse. On the other hand, I have kept some key features, such as the relatively independent nature of each verse and the complex epithets, even where such features may be initially confusing or strange. Experiments with giving them up have proven to me their centrality. Place names carry a high semantic charge. Where their imagistic associations are striking, as in the case of the stations of the beloved's departure, I have translated them (Twin Mountain, Marblehead). Where such feature translation would be distracting or where the original feature meaning is less apparent, I have used the Arabic names (Minan,

Rukhām, Fayd, Tilkhām). The translator walks a fine line. The new poem should not be too alien to be appreciated, but it must retain enough of the distinctive character of the original to provide a true encounter. During the ten years spent on translating these poems, I consistently found that when a verse failed to come alive in English, I had not grasped its meaning as well as I had thought—an experience that has shown me most vividly the multilayered depth and complexity of early Arabic poetry.

This is the voice of a distant, bedouin world. Yet the poetry itself has much about it that appeals to our time: sharpness of image, symbolic depth, subtlety and suppleness of allusion, honesty in encounter with the human condition, and unsentimental expression of feeling. And for all its distance from us, we encounter this poetry with a remarkable immediacy. Through the transmutations of poetry, these remembrances of the beloved, these journeys, these battles are recognized to be our own.

1. See Reynold Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1956), pp. 101–102, and "The *Mu'allaqāt* Problem" by Abdulla el-Tayib, an appendix to his "Pre-Islamic Poetry," *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 111–113.

2. The view that the poetry is a forgery of the Islamic period has not gained much acceptance. See D. Margoliouth, "Origins of Arabic Poetry," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1925): 417–419, where the forgery theory is propounded with abuse, typical of his time, of Arabic culture as a whole, and Taha Husayn, *Fi l-adab al-jāhili* [On Jāhili Literature] (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, n.d.).

3. See J. Monroe, "Oral Composition in Pre-Islamic Poetry," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 3 (1972): 1–53; M. Zwettler, *The Oral Tradition of Classical Arabic Poetry* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1978).

4. See J. Stetkevych, "Name and Epithet: The Philology and Semiotics of Animal Nomenclature in Early Arabic Poetry," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 45:2 (1986): 89–124; and Th. E. Homerin, "Echoes of a Thirsty Owl: Death and Afterlife in Pre-Islamic Arabic Poetry," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 44:3 (1985): 165–185.

5. See M. Sells, "The *Mu'allāqa* of Ṭarafa," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 17 (1986): 21–33. For reasons of space I have not been able to include the *Mu'allāqa* of Ṭarafa in this present volume.

6. Harry Slochower, *Mythopoesis: Mythic Patterns in the Literary Classics* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 22–24.

7. See S. Stetkevych, "Structuralist Interpretations of Pre-Islamic Poetry: Critique and New Directions," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 42:2 (1983): 85–107; "The *Ṣu'lūk* and His Poem: A Paradigm of Passage Manqué," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 104.4 (1984): 661–668.

8. Whether these various movements existed as independent genres before the development of the qasida has long been a matter of speculation.

9. See J. Stetkevych, "Arabic Poetry and Assorted Poetics," *Islamic Studies: A Tradition and Its Problems* (Malibu, CA: Undena Pub., 1980), pp. 103–123; and M. Sells, "The *Qaṣīda* and the West: Self-Reflective Stereotype and Critical Encounter," *Al-ʿArabiyya* 20 (1987), pp. 307–357.

10. These six odes are only a sample of the heritage of pre-Islamic poetry. I have not included the much translated *Muʿallaqa* of Imruʿ al-Qays: see the version of Basima Bezirgan and Elizabeth Fernea in J. Berque, *Cultural Expression in Arab Society Today* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978). In the translations and introductions I have rendered Arabic words with an English qualitative accent, saving for the notes the more formal transliteration. The introductions are meant to serve several purposes, from introduction of key terms and conventions to critical reevaluation of the poems. Some may find it preferable to read the poem first, then the introduction, before returning to the poem. Sources include the Anbārī, Tibrīzī, and Zawzanī versions of the *Muʿallaqāt*, al-Mufaḍḍal al-Qabbī's *al-Mufaḍḍaliyyat*, Shantamarī's *Diwāns of the Six Jāhili Poets*, the Zamaḥsharī, Mallūhī, and pseudo-Mubarrad versions of Shanfarā's *Lāmiyya*, and various editions of the *diwāns*. Technical discussion of texts and variants has been saved for another occasion.

## ʿAlqama

### *Is What You Knew Kept Secret*

This poem opens with a classic example of the remembrance of the beloved's departure, the *zaʿn*. The episode is introduced by a series of obliquely related questions concerning the beloved and the secret she entrusted to the poet. At its center is the reference to the *utrūjja* (the citron, *etrog*), a word with a clearly non-Arabic origin that would have been almost as exotic to the Arabs as the Arabic word is to the modern reader. In order to preserve the intertwined associations of the rare, the sensual, and the exotic, I have kept the Arabic word in the translation. The colors of the howdah are indicated with a suggestion, somewhat shocking, of birds (probably birds of prey) confusing the rich red dye of the cloth with blood. A mention of the poet's tears, through an outrun and dissembling simile, flows into an extended depiction of the roan mare (the *nāqa*) pulling an irrigation bag, with all the associations of fertility and overflowing abundance that the memory of the beloved evokes. A final, proclaimed effort to renounce memory of Sālma is followed by the most specific memory of her, of the folds and clings of her garment. This is the closest the poem comes to describing her, her features still, as always, poetically veiled.

The journey begins with the night courser, *nāqa*, only to turn rather quickly to a one-verse mention of the "tuck-bellied brindle-leg" (bull oryx), a mention that is as compelling as it is brief, as if the image were glimpsed in the depths of the imagination. The substitutions end with the "red-legged clump-wing" (ostrich), at which point the poem opens onto a classic tableau: the male ostrich browsing, then racing back to the nest (here, as if in two temporally separate flashes, racing back once to the eggs, another time to the chicks), the thin mouth, feet flying past the small, earless head, a clucking that is like the babble of foreigners. The babbling foreigners are Byzantine Romans (*rum*), a reversal of the etymology of the English term *barbarism* as the babble of those speaking other (non-Greek) tongues. Here it is the Greeks who are the babblers to a bedouin poet at home in a highly articulate cultural-linguistic world of his own. The comparison of the wing carriage of the ostrich to a tent shows how such standard features, fine-honed over generations and selected down to the precise simile, can achieve the most striking originality in how they are performed. In the *Muʿallaqa* of ʿAntara, the same

comparison is made, with a subtle and important difference. 'Alqama's comparison fits in perfectly with the erotic and humorous mood of the entire ostrich scene, the wing carriage compared to a "caved-in heap of a tent set up wrong by a clumsy maid." In 'Antara, the ostrich performance is dominated by a more tragic mood, as is the ode as a whole, the wing carriage compared to a "funeral litter above a tented bier."

The boast is introduced by a powerful set of proverbs. Proverbs most often appear in the qasida individually, usually in the second hemistich of a verse, offering a timeless perspective in balance with the particular situation evoked in the first hemistich, as in a verse that occurs later in the poem: "Whatever the stakes, the loser pays." At times proverbs dominate an ode, as in the Mu'allaqa of Zuhāy. Here they extend to seven verses, carefully balanced with the other sections of the poem. At any point in the qasida, the proverbial meditation on fate and loss can be evoked in a variety of ways with the subtlest movement in grammar or diction.

The wine song, one of the earliest in a long line of homages to the magic qualities of wine, presents the wine with a ritual formality. This banquet is followed by the image of the warrior on horseback, enduring hunger, heat, and sandstorms. The ode also ends with pageantry, as the horse and camel are led in a procession with praise of their qualities and lineage. Pageantry ties together several movements: the *nasīb* scene of the maiden servants leading in the howdah camels (which are always stallions); the veiling of the beloved within her howdah drapery and the procession that leads her away from the poet; the bringing out and unveiling of the wine; and the formal procession of horse and camel mare that closes the poem. The reference to the camels pleading like a tambourine being torn on the heights carries a special force due to its echoing of similar comparisons, usually to mourning women wailing on a high ridge.

This ode of 'Alqama is a balanced representation of the qasida model at what seems to be a very early period. It is vivid in its imagistic surface, and unsentimental in its hesitancy to reveal directly the interior world of emotion, allowing the material image or impersonal proverb in almost every case to speak, articulating its secret within the subtle resonances of a formal pageantry and its brilliant poetic veils.

'Alqama ibn 'Abada of the tribe of Tamīm is said to have lived in the sixth century C.E., to have been a poetic rival of Imru' al-Qays, and to have been involved in the struggle between the Arab kingdoms of Ghassān (a satellite of the Byzantine empire) and Lakhm (a satellite of the Persian empire).

The meter is quantitative (a long vowel, diphthong, or vowel followed by a

double consonant forming a long foot, all other vowels forming a short foot). The meter is the *basīṭ*, based upon the feet:  $\sim$  (or  $-$ )  $\sim \sim - / -$  (or  $\sim$ )  $\sim -$ . The first verse would be scanned as follows, a macron indicating a naturally long vowel:

$\sim \sim \sim / \sim \sim - / - \sim \sim - / - -$   
*hal mā 'alimta wa mā stūdi'ta maktūmū*  
 $\sim \sim \sim - / - \sim \sim - / - \sim \sim - / - -$   
*am ḥabluḥā idh na'atka l-yawma maṣrūmū*

Translator's divisions: *nasīb*; journey, with *nāqa* ("night courser"), oryx bull ("tuck-bellied brindle-leg"), and ostrich ("red-legged clump-wing"); proverbs; wine song; horse scene and pageantry.



## Is What You Knew Kept Secret

Is what you came to know,  
given in trust,  
kept secret? Is her bond to you  
broken, now that she is far?

Does a grown man weeping  
tears without end for those he loved,  
the dawn of parting,  
receive his fair reward?

By the time I knew,  
they had set their leave,  
all the camel stallions  
standing bridled before dawn,

Camel stallions of her tribe  
led in by maiden servants,  
then loaded,  
bundles bound in Tazidi brocade,

While birds hung in the air  
plucking at dye streaks and tassels  
as if they'd been stained  
heartsblood crimson.

They carried an *utrújja* away.  
A saffron-scented perfume trailed.  
Before the senses even now  
her fragrance lingers,

The folds of her hair  
redolent as musk when the pod is opened.  
Reaching out to touch it  
even the stuff-nosed is overcome.

Liken my weeping eye to a water bag  
dragged down the well slope  
by a roan mare, withers  
bound to the saddle-stay,

For a full season unsaddled,  
until her hump hardened,  
firm as the rounded side  
of a smith's bellows,

Cured of the mange  
and covered  
with a resinous balm,  
clear and pure,

Spilling water into channels  
as grain husks part  
from the ripening fruit,  
the flooded slopes flowing over.

To remember *Sálma!* to recall  
times spent with her  
is folly, conjecture about the other side,  
a casting of stones,

Breast sash crossed  
and falling, gown folds  
at the hip, clinging, tender  
as a gazelle fawn reared within the yard.

---

Will I overtake  
her far-flung tribe's rear guard  
on a night courser,  
solid as a worn boulder in a stream,

Dromedarian lips,  
tinged by a wash of green mallow  
that foams up  
over cheek and jaw?

On one like that,  
borne through the desert,  
ranging far, while in the shadows  
the owl sends forth a muffled cry.

She side-eyes the whip,  
silent as a tuck-bellied brindle-leg,  
ears sharpened  
to the softest sound,

Or like a red-legged clump-wing,  
bitterapple and castorberry  
ripening for him  
behind the twisting dune.

At the black-banded colocynth  
he lingers,  
cracking pods,  
and snapping sprouts of grey castor,

Mouth like the split in a stick—  
you barely make it out—  
and ears, tufted markings,  
as if he'd been docked,

Until he remembers some eggs,  
disquieted by a day  
of drizzle and wind  
and a covering of cloud.

He quickens his pace,  
without strain,  
whisking along just short of all out,  
untiring.

Split-foot flying  
past his bulging eye,  
as if he were wary of ill luck,  
fear-quickened,

A strider, forechest  
like the string of a lyre,  
like a water bird  
in a meadow pool.

He doubles back to a down-cropped  
brood of nestlings  
that appear when they tumble over  
like a clod-covered root,

Circling the nest hollow,  
circling again,  
searching for tracks...

Until he reaches  
as the sun's horn rises  
the nest hollow  
and a heap of eggs,

Beckoning to them  
with a cackling and clucking  
like the babble of Greeks  
in their fortresses,

Small-headed, thin-necked,  
wings and chest  
like a caved-in heap of a tent  
set up wrong by a clumsy maid.

A female draws near,  
long neck lowered,  
responding  
with a warbling cry.

---

Every tribe,  
though great, though many,  
will one day see its chief  
struck down by the hearthstones of evil.

Praise can't be purchased  
except for a price  
men begrudge,  
one that is well known.

Generosity is a blight on riches,  
an abode of loss.  
What you hoard is left over,  
the object of scorn.

What you own  
is a woolly plaything,  
growing long on stubby sheep,  
then shorn.

He who gains his quarry  
the day of the raid  
finds it wherever he turns.  
He who misses, misses out.

Hot-neck folly will cross your path.  
You don't have to track it down.  
Foresight and self-command  
make themselves scarce in the crowd.

Whoever comes upon crows  
and scatters them for an omen  
though secure at the time  
is fated to ruin.

Every fortress,  
long safe on great pillars,  
will one day  
be razed to the ground.

I could well see the drinkers,  
among them a ringing lyre,  
men laid low  
by golden, foaming wine,

The drink of a potentate,  
aged by tavernkeepers  
for a special occasion.  
It'll take you up and spin you around.

For the headache it's a cure.  
A jolt of it won't harm you.  
No dizziness from it  
will mix in your brain,

A vintage of 'Anah, a slammer,  
for a full year unexposed,  
kept in a clay-stoppered jug  
with a waxen seal,

Glistening in its decanter,  
while a foreign-born page,  
mouth covered with a cotton band,  
pours it,

Flagon like a gazelle  
high on the cliff face,  
neck and spout sealed  
with a linen sieve.

Its keeper brings it out into the sun.  
It flashes white,  
ringed by branches of sweet basil,  
fragrance brimming over.

Many times have I set out early  
against a peer,  
accompanied by a firm,  
fine-honed, piercing blade.

Many times have I gambled,  
trusting hunger to an arrow  
carved from hard wood,  
bound with sinew and notched.

They put their stallions up for wager.  
I offered mine first.  
Whatever the stakes,  
the loser pays.

I might well ride with a band of braves,  
no provisions  
but a food sack green with mold  
and some stinking meat.

Many times have I mounted the saddle frame,  
face seared  
by a day of the Gemini  
and pestilent, blistering winds.

Burning,  
as if one were cloaked  
and turbaned, wrap on wrap  
in the kindled air.

I might well lead before the tribe  
a tall mare,  
as if her lineage, known to all,  
were leading her,

With a flawless splint bone  
and a flawless pastern,  
with hoof walls  
trimmed and intact,

With shanks like the base of a palm branch,  
legs like a Náhdi's staff,  
feet with a hoof frog as tough  
as a hard-gnawed date pit from Qúrran,

She follows a troop of black dromedaries  
that cry out when driven  
like a tambourine  
torn on the heights.

On one side a spring-born calf  
is pleading, while on the other  
the old camels, humps high,  
bellow,

Led by a stallion,  
worn and tried,  
an old-timer,  
meaty, huge.

## Shánfara

### Arabian Ode in "L"

The "Arabian Ode [Rhyming] in 'L'" (*Lámiyyat al-Arab*) is the most famous *su'lúk* qasida. It appears to neglect the normal qasida tripartite pattern, and, like the *su'lúk* or brigand himself, to wander without apparent sense of progression or goal. The poem begins with Shánfara abandoned by, or abandoning, his tribe, claiming that he has better friends in the desert scavengers and in his sword, heart, and bow. In embracing this paradoxical community of marauding animals, weapons, and self, Shánfara refers to himself as a *karim*. The term is often translated as "generous one" or "noble," but its range of heroic values is so comprehensive that I have rendered it as "man," allowing the poem to fill in its meaning. The *Lámiyya* has become a touchstone for the ethos of the pre-Islamic *karim*, even though on the formal level the *su'lúk* inverts many of the *karim*'s most important traits.

The poem then turns to abusive satire (*hijá*). The traits ridiculed (vanity, laziness, inability to follow through on plans, susceptibility to being flustered or taken unawares) are associated with *jahl*, an undisciplined impetuosity opposed to the virtue of *hilm* (self-command, calm and seasoned calculation of one's situation). This poem is a vivid manifestation of the heroic *hilm-jahl* ethos before its transformation by the Qur'an into a religious ethic.

The satirical tone grows suddenly somber as the desert overcomes the unskilled traveler, "lagging, frantic, losing his way." Two similes then lead into extended animal vignettes. In each case the initial descriptive point (patient as a wolf, swift as a sand grouse) is both accomplished and outrun as the poetic voice overflows into two of the more famous extended similes in Arabic poetry.

The voice then becomes more personal. In a passage of psychological intensity, Shánfara personifies his crimes as drawing lots for his "hamstrung flesh." The heroic boast is being inverted. In the standard boast, the hero reaffirms his role as a *karim* by sacrificing his *náqa* and distributing the meat through the *máysir* game. In Shánfara's metaphor, it is the poet himself who is depicted as the slaughtered *náqa*. This portrayal of the *su'lúk* as his own riding camel echoes a similar inversion earlier in the poem where the poet refers to his "sole pads." The paradox within the outcast's assertion of the quintessentially tribal role of the *karim* is

most evident here where the camel sacrifice and the *māysir* reference (starving wolves as thin as arrow shafts rattling around in the hand of a gambler) come to symbolize not the plenty of the tribal benefactor, but bare-boned privation.

After burning his bow and arrow wood (another loss of cultural identity) on a night of ill luck, Shānfara haunts the fringes of community, preying upon it through a night raid that is presented with a chilling indirection ("and a man, no, men don't act like that"). The reference to a jinni may recall the "mother of dust," mentioned just before the raid and which may be an allusion to the *ghul*, that female jinni known to change forms constantly, bewilder the traveler, and lead him to destruction. After a final journey scene, again with the hero traveling on foot, *su'lūk* style, the ode ends with a moment of quiet lyricism, the poet standing unnoticed amid the mountain goats, as if he himself were a mountain goat or mountain antelope ("white-foot," "tall-horned").

In this *su'lūk* ode there is no remembrance of the beloved. Shānfara's rejoicing in the departure of his tribe at the beginning of the poem is an ironic countertype to the lament over the beloved's departure. What boast elements there are, such as the camel sacrifice, are also inverted. Even the journey, the major theme of this poem, is given an ironic performance. Shānfara travels on foot rather than by camel mare, never reaching a goal of reintegration with society, but—like his starving wolves—is passed endlessly on from one desert into another.

Still, what is formally absent is brought back in subtle ways. The lyrical ending of the poem recalls the idyllic animal poses of the *nasīb*, a resonance compounded by the allusion, brought in through a dissembled simile, to women draped in flowing shawls. The perpetual solitude of the antisocial *su'lūk* is countered by the images of community that appear in his similes ("like droves of camels at a wayside pool"). Especially powerful are the resonances of the dirge, a *topos* that often formed a separate poem of its own and which was closely related to the *nasīb*: the dirge being a lament for the deceased loved one, the *nasīb* a lament for the absent beloved. Images of mourning women recur throughout the poem. Within the twanging of the bow and behind the howling of the wolves, one hears the echo of dirge, and through its associations, the lament for the lost beloved, the lost garden, the broken community, echoes of a sadness particularly haunting in its partial concealment beneath the *su'lūk* demeanor that "keeps its composure over what it hides."

The legend of Shanfarā of the tribe of Azd is particularly complex. He is said to have been captured from his natal tribe by a clan of the Fahm, then

sold back to an Azdite clan, the Banū Salāmān, in exchange for a captive member of the Fahm. When his natal tribe treated him as a foreigner, he swore revenge, joined up with the Fahm, and spent his life as a *su'lūk*, raiding the Salāmān. He avenged the murder of his adoptive father (according to another version, his natal father) by killing a man during a sacred pilgrimage and just before his death he is said to have recited the famous verses asking that his body be left unburied for the hyenas. The historical accuracy of the legend and of the *Lāmiyya*'s attribution to Shanfarā are in doubt. (Even in medieval times it was considered by some to be the work of the Basran grammarian of the Islamic period, Khalaf al-Aḥmar.) The legend has been shown to be a reflection of central themes within the *Lāmiyya* and *su'lūk* poetry generally: confusion of kinship and identity; inversion of tribal values concerning the pilgrimage, rules of war, and the burial of the dead; and inversion of blood vengeance as an act to be carried out, by definition, against non-kin. See S. Stetkevych, "Archetype and Attribution in Early Arabic Poetry: Al-Shanfarā and the *Lāmiyyat al-'Arab*," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 18 (1986): 361–90.

Verses 8–9, generally considered problematical, have been omitted.

The meter is the *ṣawīl*, the most common of the pre-Islamic meters, based upon the feet: – – – (or –) / – – – (or –) –.

– – – / – – – – / – – – / – – – –  
aqīmū banī ummī ṣudūra matiyyikum

– – – / – – – – / – – – – / – – – –  
fa innī ilā qawmin siwākum la amyālū

<sup>1</sup> Translator's divisions: the break with the tribe; *hijā'* and *su'lūk* boast; the wolf scene; the sand grouse; tracked down by his crimes; raid, *su'lūk* journey, and ending.

## Arabian Ode in "L"

Get up the chests of your camels  
and leave, sons  
of my mother. I lean to a tribe  
other than you.

What must be is at hand.  
The moon is full,  
mounts and saddle frames secured  
for distant crossings.

In this land is a refuge for a man  
from wrongs,  
for one fearing scalding hatred,  
a place to withdraw.

By your life! It crowds on no man  
who travels by night,  
in fear or in desire,  
and keeps his wits about him.

I have in place of you other kin:  
the wolf, unwearying runner,  
the darting sand leopard,  
the bristle-necked hyena.

These are my clan. They don't reveal  
a secret given in trust,  
and they don't abandon a man  
for his crimes.

They are the scornful ones,  
the fierce, though I  
at first sight of the prey  
am fiercer.

As recompense for losing those  
who don't repay a favor,  
in whose nearness  
I cannot feel ease,

I have three friends: a brave  
heart, a bare  
blade, and a long  
bow of yellow wood,

Smooth and taut,  
sonorous,  
bedecked with jeweled tokens,  
secured with a crossbelt,

And when it lets the arrow slip  
it twangs,  
like a child-bereft mother,  
grief-struck, who moans and wails.

---

I'm no quick-to-thirst,  
herd ill-pastured at dusk,  
calves ill-fed  
though their mother's udders are untied,

No foul-breathed cringer,  
wife-clinging,  
asking her in every affair  
what to do,

No ostrich,  
gangly, stupefied,  
as if a sparrow were beating up and down  
in his heart,

No malingerer, stay-at-home,  
woman-chaser,  
evening and morning coated with kohl  
and perfume,

No tick,  
worthless, indolent,  
leaping up, when startled,  
unarmed,

Nor bewildered by the dark  
when the towering emptiness  
turns astray the traveler, lagging,  
frantic, losing his way.

When my sole pads  
meet the gravel flint  
it flies up sparking,  
shattered.

I push hunger on  
until it dies,  
drive attention from it,  
forget.

I'd sooner slurp the dust,  
a dry mouthful,  
than take some man's  
condescending favors.

Were I not shunning blame  
I would lack  
no food, no drink,  
no ease of life,

But this hard soul  
gives me no rest  
when wronged  
until I move on,

Wrapping my insides  
around an empty stomach pit,  
like a weaver's threads  
spun and twisted.

---

I part at dawn on meager fare  
like a wolf  
led on, desert into desert,  
scrawny, grey.

He sets out at dawn, hungry,  
quick into the wind,  
slicing down where the ravine ends  
and veering.

He moves on in pursuit of food.  
It eludes him.  
He howls. His mates respond,  
hunger-worn,

Thin as the new moon,  
ashen-faced, like arrow shafts  
rattling around  
in the hand of a gambler,

Like a queen bee,  
swarm roused  
by the two poles of a cliff-dangling  
honey-gatherer,

Wide-jawed, gape-mouthed,  
as if their jaws  
were the sides of a split stick,  
grinning, grim.

He howls in the empty spaces,  
they howl,  
as if they and he were bereaved women  
on the high ridge, wailing.

His eyelids sag. He grows silent.  
They follow his lead.  
They, he, forlorn,  
take heart from one another.

He turns back. They turn back,  
surging, hard pressed,  
keeping composure  
over what they hide.

---

The sand grouse drink what I leave behind.  
They approach the water hole  
after a night journey,  
their sides rumbling.

I resolved. They did.  
We raced. Their wings fell limp  
while I stood in front at ease  
with my robe tucked up.

I turned away.  
They tumbled to the rim,  
crops and gullets  
squeezing and pulsing,

As if their clatter  
on both sides of the water hole  
were groups of men from caravans,  
letting themselves down,

Congregating from all sides  
and taken in  
like droves of camels  
at a wayside pool.

They gulped swiftly and passed on  
at dawn  
like panic-stricken riders  
from Uháza.

---

I know the earth's face well.  
There I stretch out,  
restless,  
dried out vertebrae and a crooked back,

An arm for a pillow,  
worn to the bone,  
joints standing up like bone cubes  
strewn by a gambler.

And if the mother of dust  
grieves for Shánfara now,  
long did she find satisfaction in him  
before!

His crimes track him down.  
They cast lots  
for the choicest piece  
of his hamstrung flesh.

When he sleeps  
they spend the night,  
eyes open, quick to his ruin,  
working their way in.

Shánfara, friend of cares!  
Time after time they return  
like quartan fever  
or worse.

When they come down  
I drive them out.  
They turn back from all sides  
upon me.

Though you might see me  
sun-beaten as a sand daughter,  
ragged, shoeless,  
with worn feet,

Still am I the master of patience,  
wearing its armor  
over the heart of a sand cat,  
shod with resolution.

Sometimes I have nothing,  
sometimes all I need.  
Only one who gives himself,  
far-seeing, will prosper.

I don't lose nerve in adversity,  
exposing weakness,  
nor do I prance, self-satisfied,  
in my riches.

The hot-neck fool will not provoke  
my self-command, and I am not seen  
begging at the heels of conversations  
and slandering.

---

On how many a night of ill luck  
when the hunter burns his bow  
for fuel,  
and his arrow wood,

Have I trodden through darkness and drizzle,  
on fire with hunger,  
grinding inside, shivering,  
filled with dread.

Then have I widowed women  
and orphaned children,  
returning as I began,  
the night a blacker black.

When next morning in Ghumaysá  
two groups met,  
one asking about me,  
the other being asked:



"Last night our dogs were whining."

"A wolf prowling, or a hyena?"

"Just a faint sound, then silence."

"Perhaps a startled grouse, or a hawk?"

"If a jinni,  
what an ill-boding night visitor!  
and a man, no,  
men don't act like that."

To how many a day of the dog star,  
when the sun drools heat  
and snakes writhe  
on the burning ground,

Have I turned my face,  
no veil to protect it  
but the tattered shreds  
of an Athami cloak,

With hair down my back,  
flying up  
when the wind takes it  
in uncombed clumps,

Unoiled, unloused,  
encrusted,  
a full turn of seasons  
without a rinse of mallow.

How many a desert plain, wind-swept,  
like the surface of a shield,  
empty, impenetrable,  
have I cut through on foot,

Joining the near end to the far,  
then looking out from a summit,  
crouching sometimes,  
then standing,

While mountain goats, flint-yellow,  
graze around me,  
meandering like maidens  
draped in flowing shawls.

They become still in the setting sun,  
around me, as if I were a white-foot,  
bound for the high mountain meadow,  
tall-horned.

Labid

## The Mu'allaqa

In this poem the traces of the beloved's campsite reappear in differing forms: torrent beds that are highlighted as they are worn away; writings and inscriptions effaced and then restored; a tattoo, symbol of the unchanging, that fades and is renewed; the ruins of Nawár's campsite and the scene, remembered or imagined, that they conjure. The line between remembrance and imagination at this point is difficult to find. The spring rains, flowering meadows, and tranquil poses of desert animals such as the gazelle, ostrich, and "wide-of-eyes" (oryx doe) are evoked through remembrance of the beloved, Nawár. The underlying archetype—beloved as lost garden—begins to unfold. The interplay of absence and presence, effacement and manifestation, barrenness and verdant meadows, ends in a final contrast between silence and speech. Although renewed, the inscriptions are indecipherable. When the poet questions the ruins, they are *summ* (hard, deaf), offering only a lapidary silence, or words whose meaning is unclear.

After the departure of the howdah caravan (*za'n*) a more distant perspective is offered, the group fading into the distance like "tamarisks and boulders on the slopes of Bishah." The precise and specific delineation of the monuments that Nawár passes almost masks the fact that the poet is not with her and can only imagine the trajectory of her journey. When the tension between this geographical and temporal distancing, on the one hand, and the poetic and imaginative lingering over her presence, on the other, reaches the breaking point, the journey section abruptly begins: "Cut the bond . . ."

In the journey, the *náqa* ("journey-worn mare") is displaced first by the episode of the onagers ("sheen-of-udder" and "white-belly"), displaced in turn by the episode of the "wild one" or "flat-nosed one" (the oryx doe) who loses her fawn to wolves, is cornered by hunters, and kills two hunting dogs (Kasábi—literally Fetch—and Sukhám). An associative polarity is generated: highlands, drought, heat, mating, and endurance in the onager section, lowlands, flooding, death of offspring, and fragility in the oryx section. By the time we reach the oryx, the initial "likeness" of the *náqa* has turned to polarity, the associations of the oryx in almost direct contrast with the quasi-elemental endurance of the *náqa*. A different kind of valence-reversal occurs between the oryx

in the journey and the oryx in the *nasīb*. In the *nasīb*, the water was associated with idyll, the oryx ("wide-of-eyes") was presented in an Edenlike domesticity, and human presence or company (*uns*) was the object of yearning. In the oryx scene of the journey, water is associated with flooding, loss, and death, the oryx ("wild one") with a more vulnerable and more sensual world, and human presence with dread.

The boast is ushered in by Labid's famous wine song, the poet protesting all too much how well he has forgotten Nawár. The wine song is followed by a brief, but powerful depiction of the hero on horseback descending a mountain: "The sun's hand dropped into thickening darkness. . . ." The vantage-point scene, with the way-marks and terrain obscured in dust, recalls the reference to a vantage point in the onager tableau of the journey ("the way-stones charged with fear"), while contrasting with the topographical clarity of the stages of Nawár's journey recounted by a poet who was not there.

The culmination of the boast is the ritual slaughter of the *náqa*, and the division of the meat through the *máysir* game. At this moment the individual voice of the poet is subsumed into the collective voice of the tribe, and the various currents of the ode, deep, wandering, diffuse, come together in a final torrent of tribal chant. What is chanted is the *sunna* (path, custom) of the ancestors, and the *shar'* (division, sharing) of the tribe. Special insistence is given to the feeding and sheltering of those with weak kinship bonds. The destitute are likened to a *baliyya* or ghost mare, the riding mare that was tethered to the tomb of her fallen master and left to die. This haunting image highlights the symbolic association between the *náqa* and the self of the poet-hero and charges the *náqa* sacrifice with that association.

A later reference to the house with high roofs, and to the lord of that house, carries a charged religious sense, a sense reflected in early Islamic uses of the term "house" (*bayt*). The entire section may be a response to the Qur'anic criticism of pre-Islamic Arabian society for neglecting the orphan and the needy and to the prophetic *sunna* and *shar'* offered in place of that of the tribes. According to Labid's legend, the poet lived to a Methuselan age, and died some forty years after the founding of Islam in 622 C.E. The appearance at the end of this poem of the central pre-Islamic ritual of camel sacrifice in what appears to be a response to Qur'anic criticism, gives the poem the aura of a final assertion of the tribal ethos in the face of the prophetic challenge.

Labid ibn Rabī'a of the tribe of 'Amr is said to have lived to an age of 150, championed his tribe before the court at al-Hīra, accepted Islam, and renounced poetry under the caliph 'Umar.

The meter is the *kāmil*, in which the basic pattern, repeated three times per hemistich, is: – (or ~ ~) – ~ –. The rhyme (*hā*) results in a distinctive feature of the poem. The syllable *hā* is often the feminine or plural personal pronoun, but it is often used in this poem in a vague referential sense, setting up an interesting, nonpersonal sense of “its.”

~ ~ – ~ ~ / ~ ~ ~ ~ / ~ ~ ~ ~ –  
 ‘afat id-diyāru maḥalluhā fa muqāmuḥā  
 ~ ~ – ~ ~ / ~ ~ ~ ~ / ~ ~ ~ ~ –  
 bi minan ta’abbada ghawluḥā fa rijāmuḥā

Translator’s divisions: *nasīb*; *nāqa* (“journey-worn mare”) and onagers (“the sheen-of-udder” and the “white-belly”); the oryx doe (“wild one,” “flat-nosed one”); wine song; boast, with horseback vignette, *nāqa* sacrifice, and tribal boast.

## The Mu‘allaqa

The tent marks in Mīnan are worn away,  
 where she encamped  
 and where she alighted,  
 Ghawl and Rijām left to the wild,

And the torrent beds of Rayyān  
 naked tracings,  
 worn thin, like inscriptions  
 carved in flattened stones,

Dung-stained ground  
 that tells the years passed  
 since human presence, months of peace  
 gone by, and months of war,

Replenished by the rain stars  
 of spring, and struck  
 by thunderclap downpour, or steady,  
 fine-dropped, silken rains,

From every kind of cloud  
 passing at night,  
 darkening the morning,  
 or rumbling in peals across the evening sky.

The white pondcress has shot upward,  
 and on the wadi slopes,  
 gazelles among their newborn,  
 and ostriches,

And the wide-of-eyes,  
 silent above monthling fawns.  
 On the open terrain  
 yearlings cluster.

The rills and the runlets  
 uncovered marks like the script  
 of faded scrolls  
 restored with pens of reed,

Or tracings of a tattoo woman:  
 beneath the indigo powder,  
 sifted in spirals,  
 the form begins to reappear.

I stopped to question them.  
How is one to question  
deaf, immutable,  
inarticulate stones?

Stripped bare now,  
what once held all that tribe—  
they left in the early morning  
leaving a trench and some thatch,

They stirred longing in you  
as they packed up their howdahs,  
disappearing in the lairs of cotton,  
frames creaking,

Post-beams covered  
with twin-rodded curtains  
of every kind of cloth brocade  
and a black, transparent, inner veil,

Strung out along the route  
in groups, like oryx does of Túdih,  
or Wájrán gazelles, white fawns  
below them, soft necks turning,

They faded into the distance  
appearing in the shimmering haze  
like tamarisks and boulders  
on the slopes of Bíshah.

But why recall Nawár?  
She's gone.  
Her ties and bonds to you  
are broken.

The Múrrite lady  
has lodged in Fayd,  
then joined up with the Hijázi clans.  
Who are you to aspire to reach her,

On the eastern slopes  
of Twin Mountains or Muhájjar?  
Lonebutte has taken her in,  
then Marblehead,

Then Tinderlands  
if she heads toward Yemen—  
I imagine her there—or at Thrall Mountain  
or in the valley of Tílkhám.

---

Cut the bond  
with one you cannot reach!  
The best of those who make a bond  
are those who can break it.

Give to one who seems to care,  
give again,  
but if the love goes lame and stumbles,  
you can break it off

On a journey-worn mare,  
worn to a remnant,  
with sunken loins  
and a sunken hump.

When flesh shrinks back  
around the joints,  
and at the limits of weariness  
ankle thongs fray,

She is as fleet in the bridle  
as a reddish cloud  
emptied of water  
skimming along on the south wind.

Or a sheen-of-udder,  
mate of a rutted white-belly.  
Gnashing and kicking, the driving off of rivals,  
has turned him sallow.

Bite-scarred, wary,  
he takes her high  
into the hill curves, pregnant,  
recalcitrant, craving.

Above the craglands of Thalabút  
he climbs the vantage points,  
wind-swept,  
the way-stones charged with fear,

Until they scrape back through  
the six dry months of Jumáda,  
month on month of thirst,  
surviving on dew.

They bring their course  
to a binding plan—  
strength of intent  
is in the twist of the strands.

Pasterns tear in the briar grass.  
Summer winds  
flare into dust squalls  
and burning winds of Sumúm.

They contend in raising dust.  
Its shadow soars  
like the smoke of a firebrand,  
kindling set ablaze,

Fanned by the north wind,  
stoked with brushweed,  
the smoke of a blazing,  
high-billowing fire.

He pushes on,  
keeping her ahead.  
She balks.  
He drives her forward

Until they break  
into the midst of a stream,  
split the brimming flow  
and clustered reeds,

An enclosing stand of rushes,  
some trampled,  
some standing,  
hedging them in with shade.

---

Or was it a wild one,  
wolf-struck?  
She lagged behind the herd.  
Its lead animal had been her stay.

A flat-nosed one who lost her young,  
she does not cease  
circling the dune slopes  
and lowing,

For a white fawn, rolled in the dust  
and dismembered  
by contending wolves, ashen,  
not about to give up their portion.

They chanced upon her  
while she was unaware  
and struck. The arrows of fate  
do not miss their prey.

She passes the night  
in continuous curtains of rain  
washing around the dune tufts  
in a steady stream,

Flowing along the line of her back,  
runlet on runlet,  
on a night the stars  
are veiled in cloud.

She enters a gnarled tangle  
of roots, casting about  
with her horns, at the base of the dune  
as it drifts and falls away,

Glowing in the face  
of the dark, luminous,  
like a seaman's pearl  
come unstrung.

As night parts from dawn  
she appears in the early light,  
leg shafts slipping  
on the hard, wet sand,

Splashing, confused,  
through the pools of Su'á'id,  
back and forth,  
seven pairs of nights and days,

Until, hope gone,  
her once-full udder dries,  
though suckling and weaning  
are not what withered it down.

She makes out the sound of men,  
muffled, striking fear  
from the hidden side,  
human presence, her affliction.

Dawn finds her turning,  
front and rear,  
placing behind her and ahead  
the source of fear,

Until the archers give up  
and send in their well-trained,  
lop-eared, rawhide-collared  
hunting hounds.

They run her down.  
She wheels upon them  
with a horn, point and shaft,  
like a Samhariyya spear,

Driving them off,  
sensing death upon her  
if she fails, certain,  
fated, near.

Kasábi bears down on her.  
He is smeared in blood,  
and Sukhám, in his place of attack,  
is left to die.

---

On one like that,  
when shimmerings dance  
in the forenoon  
and hills are gowned in mirage,

I bring the issue to a close,  
not held back by doubt  
or by some critic's rummaging around  
for something there to blame.

Or didn't you know, Nawár,  
that I  
am one who ties a love knot  
and cuts it free?

Who abandons a place  
that no longer pleases,  
unless ill fate cleave  
to that some certain self of mine.

You don't know, no,  
how many nights,  
bright-faced, with drinking company  
and delicious entertainment

I have spent in talk! Showing up  
at the innkeeper's banner  
at the moment it is raised,  
when the wine is choice,

Paying any price for every vintage  
aged in blackened skins  
and tar-smeared jugs,  
seals broken,

For a pure morning draught  
and the play of a singing girl  
upon her lute, fingers slipping  
softly across the strings,

Rising early to outstrip  
the rooster's morning call  
for a second round that quenches  
when sleepers just begin to stir.

---

On how many a cold and windy morning  
have I held steady  
as the reins fall  
into the hands of the north wind,

Tribe-defender,  
sword on a fiery steed,  
my cross-sash her bridle,  
riding out at dawn

To climb to a vantage point  
over a close-walled gorge  
hidden in dust,  
dust covering the way-marks.

The sun's hand dropped  
into thickening darkness,  
the mouths of the ridge passage  
concealed in veils of shadow.

I descended to the plain,  
mare standing like a palm,  
smooth, towering trunk  
thwarting the date cutters.

I drove her on to the pace of an ostrich  
and faster,  
until she grew hot  
and her bones softened,

Saddle sliding  
as her neck poured sweat,  
girth strap drenched  
in hot foam.

Head raised, she stretched  
in the bridle, and veered  
like a water-bound pigeon  
when the flock surges.

How many strangers  
in how many an unruly mob  
where gains are sought,  
blame feared,

Lion-necked, threat-spewing,  
demanding blood,  
as if they were desert jinn,  
feet anchored in stone,

Have I given the lie  
in what they claimed,  
affirming my share of right,  
lorded over by no prince of theirs.

How many times have I called  
for a *máysir* slaughter  
and the gaming lots  
of notched arrow shafts,

Calling the throw  
for a calfless or nursing mare,  
the portions parceled out  
to all the client clans,

Distant clients and guests  
as if they'd come down  
to Tabála  
where valleys are green,

Seeking refuge among the tent ropes,  
weary as a stumbling camel,  
weary as a ghost mare,  
white-humped, left to die.

They show up when the winds wail,  
the weak of kin,  
the broken kin, the orphaned,  
to be given an equal's share.

There is yet among us  
when the council meets,  
one who seizes the moment,  
who takes on the burden,

Who divides and assigns,  
who raises high the rights of some,  
others,  
driving into the ground,

As he deems fit, magnanimous,  
munificent,  
gracious,  
seeking plunder and gaining it.

From a clan whose fathers  
have shown the way.  
For every warrior band  
there is a guide and a way.

Their honor untarnished,  
their action never fallow,  
their judgment does not lean  
with the winds of desire.

When trust was portioned out  
among the tribe,  
the divider bestowed on us  
the greater share.

Be content with what the sire  
has given.  
He who portioned merit out among us  
is most knowing.

He built for us a house  
with lofty roof.  
Boys and full-aged men  
ascend to it.

They are the protectors  
when the tribe is pressed,  
they are the riders,  
they are the rulers.

They are life-spring  
to dependents among them,  
to those without provider,  
when the year grows long.

They are the tribe  
when the envier drags his foot  
and the vile one  
leans to the enemy.

## ‘Antara

### *The Mu‘allaqa*

“O abode of ‘Abla in al-Jiwá’i, speak!” The invocation becomes incantatory with the repetition of the phrase *dára ‘ábla* (abode of ‘Abla). In this, the most tragic of the odes, the erotic or life-affirming element of speech, as reflected in the remembrance of the beloved and the wine song, sounds with consummate beauty, only to lose itself in the chaos of self-perpetuating, reciprocal violence.

In the first ten verses, reference to the beloved oscillates between the second and third person, and she is addressed by several names and nicknames (‘Abla, Bint Mákhrami, Umm al-Háytham). The grammatical and referential instability surrounds a blunt statement of separation: “killing her kinsmen, coveting, by your father’s life, what is not to be.” The social context—beloved’s tribe and poet’s tribe at war with one another—will gradually open onto a similarly tragic psychic state, as differences between self and other, kin and non-kin, warrior and enemy, break down. Mention of the wet mouth of the beloved then leads to a series of outrun similes: mouth to perfume, to garden, to rains, ending in a particularly beautiful garden scene, with a fly, alone, buzzing like a wine drinker humming a tune, or a one-armed man bent over the flint. Only the last simile, so perfectly apt, prefigures the theme of mutilation that will gradually dominate the poem.

The journey is foreshadowed by the poet-hero on horseback, a motif that before the boast is always brief, often (as here and in the ode of Dhu al-Rúmma) introduced by the thought of the beloved’s evening and dawn travels. The poem then moves into the *náqa* performance, in which is embedded an extended simile involving the ostrich. The *náqa* (“Shadaniyyan mare”) is attacked by a desert cat and veers aside from the pools of Dáylam. Water holes, normally a sign of security and renewal, are now pools of death. The episode of the “split-foot, long-nailed, stubby-ear” (the ostrich) carries equally somber associations. The comparison of the bird’s wing carriage to a tent, a comparison that had been used by ‘Alqama in a playful manner, is here turned to a very different purpose: “like a funeral litter above a tented bier.” The episode ends with another suggestion of mutilation, the ostrich, with its shaggy demeanor and earless head, likened to a “cut-eared, fur-draped slave.”

In the long boast, reciprocal violence engulfs the voice of the poem.



Wine song turns to war song through an unusually immediate wine-blood analogy and the slaying of the drinker. The veil of the beloved is replaced by the armor of the warrior pierced and unseamed. The earlier reference to the "flash edge" of the beloved's teeth—the sword and tooth metaphor built upon the common trait of gleaming—is opened onto its more violent possibilities, as the image of bared teeth is reflected and refracted into the opponent's grin of terror, the mouth of the warrior's uncle giving him advice in the midst of war, the twisted grin of the horse in battle. The only reference to the *máysir* game, normally a sign of communal nourishment and unity, is cut short with the slaying of the *máysir* player. Generosity, normally a characteristic of the rains that are evoked by the remembrance of the beloved, or of the hero providing for the tribe, is transformed into the giving of a spear thrust and the feeding of desert predators with the remains of the enemy. The poetic voice turns in ever narrower circles. The last section of the ode consists of repeated images of the piercing of the opponent's armor and the abandonment of his body as carrion.

Speech is drowned. The spear is *summ* (hard, deaf, silent). The only voices are the gurgling of a wound, the muffled groan, the complaint the horse would make were it capable of speech. The only actual words, "'Antara, on!'", are said to cure the hero's illness, but the cure is the disease, more of the same battle chaos. Once again an erotic motif, the reference (as in the ode of Dhu al-Rúmma) to the beloved as both the disease and the cure, finds a darker parallel in the boast.

Little by little a truth is unmasked. A hint had been given earlier, when 'Antara described his opponent's neck wound as "twitching like the mouth of a harelip." In his biographical legend, it is 'Antara who is described as a harelip. The cycle of reciprocal violence breaks down all difference between father and son, kin and non-kin, and, ultimately, self and other. Rather than the hierarchical relations upon which culture is based, there is a reflection of a single image, infinitely repeated as if in a set of doubled mirrors. The poem contains an unusual number of references to peers, brothers, and twins. These doublings are paralleled linguistically by a heavy use of grammatical duals and reduplicated lexical forms. The final occurrence of such doubling is 'Antara's reference to the slaying of the father of the two sons of Dámdam (Dámdam itself being a reduplication of the word for union, and a reduplicated, partial echo of the word for blood). The hero's earlier words to the beloved cannot help but be recalled: "killing her kinsmen, coveting, by your father's life, what is not to be." In the context of mimetic doubling, the identity of the father becomes charged and ambivalent, and the identity of the love that was not to be "coveted" takes on a new possibility. At

the moment of death in blood vengeance—a process of infinitely repeatable retaliation that can continue until both warring tribes are destroyed—the secret is unmasked: the hero looks into the death grin of his enemy and sees his peer, his twin, himself.

'Antara ibn Shaddād of the tribe of 'Abs is said to have lived in the sixth century C.E., to have been born to a slave of his father and later adopted into the father's full lineage, and to have fought in the War of Dāḥis. He later became the subject of the vast *Romance of 'Antar* (154 books in the 1868–93 Beirut edition), an oral epic that, though less well known in the West, has been as popular and influential as that other oral romance cycle, the *Arabian Nights*. For an account of the European discovery of a copy of the romance—ironically, on a mission to purchase a copy of the *Arabian Nights*—and the subsequent scholarship, see Peter Heath, "A Critical Review of Modern Scholarship on the *Sīrat 'Antar Ibn Shaddād* and the Popular *Sīra*," *Journal of Arabic Literature* XV (1984): 19–44.

Verses 59–62 (Tibrīzī's order), beginning with *yā shāta*, have been omitted as a probable interpolation.

The meter, like that of the Mu'allaqa of Labīd, is the *kāmil*. An unusual feature of this ode is the repetition of the *maṭla'*, or verse with an interior rhyme between hemistichs. The *maṭla'* is usually used only for the opening verse, but here each of the first two verses contains an interior hemistich rhyme. Verse 2:

— — — / — — — — — / — — — — —  
*yā dāra 'ablata bi l-jiwā'i takallamī*  
 — — — — — / — — — — — / — — — — —  
*wa 'imī ṣabāḥan dāra 'ablata wa slamī*

Translator's divisions: the *nasīb*; the journey, with a brief horseback vignette, the *nāqa* ("Shadaniyyan mare"), and the ostrich ("split-foot, long-nailed, stubby-ear"); the warrior's boast.

## *The Mu<sup>c</sup>allaqa*

Have the poets left anywhere  
in need of patching? Or did you,  
after imaginings,  
recognize her abode?

O abode of 'Abla in al-Jiwá'i,  
speak! Morning greetings,  
abode of 'Abla,  
peace!

There I halted my camel mare,  
towering like a fortress above me—  
to consummate the care  
of one who lingers.

'Abla makes camp in al-Jawá'i,  
while our tribe  
in al-Házni, then as-Suwán,  
then Mutaththálam . . .

Long live traces  
time made old,  
barren and empty  
after Umm al-Háytham.

She pitches camp  
in the land of the bellowers . . .  
hard for us, seeking  
you, Bint Mákhrami!

I fell for her by chance,  
killing her kinsmen,  
coveting, by your father's life,  
what is not to be.

You have come to rest—  
don't doubt me in it—  
at the way station  
of the honored beloved,

But where is the chance for our meeting,  
her people in 'Unáyzatayn  
following spring pastures,  
mine in Gháylam?

You had set your mind on parting,  
yes, but only on a night  
darkened in cloud  
were your mounts bridled,

The fear I felt, no more  
than the pack camels of her clan,  
among the tents  
champing the Khimkhim berries,

Twenty-four milch camels  
as black  
as the inner wing feathers  
of the blackest crow.

She takes your heart  
with the flash edge of her smile,  
her mouth sweet to the kiss,  
sweet to the taste,

As if a draft of musk  
from a spiceman's pouch  
announced the wet gleam  
of her inner teeth,

Fragrant as an untouched meadow,  
bloom and grass  
sheltered in rain, untrodden,  
dung-free, hidden.

Over it the white,  
first clouds of spring  
pour down, leaving small pools  
like silver dirhams,

Pouring and bursting,  
evening on evening  
gushing over it  
in an endless stream.

The fly has it all to himself,  
and is not about to leave,  
droning softly,  
like a wine drinker humming a tune,

Then buzzing, elbow on elbow,  
like a one-armed man  
kindling a fire,  
bent down over the flint.

---

At evening and at dawn she travels  
on a pillow  
while I spend the night  
on a bridled black stallion,

My cushion the saddle  
over his thick-legged,  
full-flanked,  
barrel-girthed frame.

Will a Shadaniyyan mare,  
shut off from nurslings,  
udders dry,  
carry me to her dwelling?

After a full night's journey  
still lashing her tail,  
still strutting,  
smashing the sand mounds and pawing,

As if one evening I were  
blasting through the sand mounds  
on a split-foot,  
long-nailed, stubby-ear,

Chicks skittering after  
like droves of Yemeni camels  
flocking toward a foreigner  
who stammers and babbles.

They follow the jug of his head  
as if they were following  
a funeral litter  
above a tented bier.

Knob-skulled, gawk-necked,  
he returns to his eggs  
in Dhu 'Usháyra, then stands  
like a cut-eared, fur-draped slave.

She watered at al-Duhrudáyn,  
then veered,  
forequarters pulling,  
turning aside from the water holes of Dáylam,

As if she were pulling away  
with her wild side  
from a huge-headed  
howler of the evening.

A dune cat that clings to her side,  
warding her off  
with teeth and claws  
when she turns raging against it.

She kneels at the water  
of al-Ridá'i  
as if kneeling on broken-down,  
dried-out, crackling reeds,

As if thick oil  
or black pitch,  
fit for kindling a blaze  
around a heavy pot,

Streamed behind the ear  
of a hot-tempered,  
massive mare, strutting like a well-bred,  
bite-scarred stallion.

---

If you let your veil down before me,  
know that I am skilled  
in seizing the horseman  
in his coat of mail.

Praise me  
as you knew me,  
manner easy  
until wronged.

Given wrong  
I give it back,  
rough as a taste  
of bitterapple.

I am known  
when the hot hours calm  
to be drinking wine,  
laying down a minted coin,

A tawny luster  
from a goblet of banded glass  
near a gleaming pitcher  
stoppered on the windward side.

When drinking, all I own  
I spend away,  
though what I am  
is undiminished.

When sobered,  
I don't stop giving,  
true to nature  
as you have come to know me.

How many an unadorned beauty's lover  
have I left thrown flat,  
jugular vein twitching  
like the mouth of a harelip.

My hand beat him to it  
with a quick thrust,  
and a spray of blood  
the color of 'Andam crimson.

Why not ask your horsemen,  
daughter of Málík,  
if what you do not know  
is beyond you?

How I clung to the saddle  
of a surging stallion,  
a charger, wound-weary,  
taken on by warriors one on one,

Now in mid-field  
exposed for a run of the spear,  
now drawn back  
behind an endless harvest of bows.

Let the battle witnesses  
let you know  
how I rush into the dust-roar blindly,  
then hold back from the spoils.

How many a weapon-shrouded warrior,  
whose approach is ruin,  
inexperienced in fleeing  
or surrender,

Have my hands awarded  
the quick thrust  
of a tempered, well-joined,  
straightened spear,

Gashing him open,  
the gurgling of his wound  
guiding through the darkness  
hunger-worn wolves in search of prey.

I split through his breastplate  
with a hard, cold blade—  
the spear tip holds inviolate  
no stout-hearted brave—

and left him carrion  
to be torn apart,  
skull to wrist  
by rustling predators.

And how many a coat of mail  
on how many a famous  
protector-of-his-own  
has my sword unseamed.

How many a thrower of the gaming arrow,  
in winter cold fast-handed,  
captor of the tavern's banner,  
ill reputed,

Upon seeing me dismounted,  
searching him out,  
has bared his molars  
in what was not a smile.

I ran him through with a spear,  
then drove down  
upon him with a whetted,  
unalloyed Indian sword.

As the day spread out  
he lay before me,  
head and fingertips  
as if smeared with indigo dye,

A champion, when draped in armor,  
like the desert-dwarfing Sārha tree,  
with hard-tanned oxskin boots,  
without twin.

They tell me 'Amr  
is ungrateful for the gift  
I gave him. Thanklessness rots  
the soul of the giver.

Never will I forget  
my father's brother's  
forenoon warning, lips pulled back  
from the flash of his mouth,

As the whirl of death  
dragged champion after champion down,  
with no complaint  
but a swallowed groan.

Cut off by spear tips  
and held at bay,  
I refused to turn back,  
my foot space narrowing.

Then I heard Múrra's cry  
rising forth  
and the cry of the two sons of Rabí'a  
in the coagulating dust,

And Muhállim  
coming down on us  
banners unfurled,  
death beneath the banners of Muhállim,

I knew that when they met us  
there'd be a blow  
that would snap the nuzzled head  
from a sleeping bird.

When I saw them all approaching,  
inciting one another on,  
I wheeled about  
but incurred no blame.

"Antara!" they cried,  
their spears like well-ropes  
netting the forechest  
of my deep black stallion.

I hurled him,  
head-blaze and breast-pit,  
again and again upon them  
until he was shirted with blood.

With forequarters from the spear-fall  
twisting away,  
he complained to me  
through tears and snorting.

Had he known how to speak  
he would have protested.  
Had he known to use words  
he would have let me know.

Horses sank in the soft soil,  
mouths twisted into grins,  
long-bodied mares, and long-bodied  
short-haired stallions.

My soul was cured of its sickness  
and restored  
by the cries of the horsemen,  
"Antara, on!"

Riding camels respond to my call.  
My heart is my companion.  
Wherever I wish to go  
I urge it on with a firm command.

I feared I would die  
before the wheel of war  
turned down  
over the two sons of Dámdam

Who slandered me  
though I never did them the same,  
vowing blood  
if I failed to meet them.

Let them—  
I left their father  
carion for the lion  
and the grey-faced bird of prey.

Al-A<sup>ʿ</sup>sha

## *Bid Huráyra Farewell*

In 'Antara's poem, the erotic voice was engulfed in reciprocal violence. In this poem, it disguises itself in a dance of hyperbole. The self-mocking tone is set from the opening evocation of the beloved, with its exaggeration of conventional standards of beauty: tender walk, soft skin, narrow waist, lowered gaze, and dignified behavior. The depiction of Huráyra as a delicate lady reaches its extreme as she collapses in fatigue after a brief conversation with a neighbor.

The first part of the *nasīb* ends with a run of dissembling similes: perfume to the scent of musk and rose jasmine to the flooded garden. The second part of the *nasīb* parodies two more *nasīb* themes: the lover's complaint and the love-mad poet. An enumeration of mismatched lovers ends in confusion (the reader is advised not to sort out too closely the relationships at the end of the list), a confusion that echoes the lover's mental state. The bacchic mood gives way, suddenly, to a mention of fate ("intimations of death shades") that, as in most true bacchic movements, stands out in high relief from the proclaimed refusal to consider anything but the enjoyment of the moment.

The "intimations" verse might well have signaled the end of the *nasīb*, but Al-A<sup>ʿ</sup>sha's ode luxuriates in an unhurried enjoyment of erotic themes. Accenting this lack of urgency is the confusion among various recensions concerning the order of verses. The linear progression is at times difficult to discern. Instead of a transition to a journey, there is a passage depicting a storm and wine-drinking, the desert earth and the drinkers both quenched. The thematic center of the passage is the poet's command to the drinkers: "Foretell!" (*shímu*). The foretelling of the rain's direction, the foretelling of the loss of the beloved and of the spring pasture grounds, and the premonition of mortality are brought together with semantic and metrical force in the one-word command. The actual act of foretelling consists of a recounting of the places upon which the rain might fall. This kind of litany usually occurs (as in Labíd's Mu<sup>ʿ</sup>allaqa) in the *za<sup>ʿ</sup>n* section of the *nasīb*, where the place names are the stations (*maqamát*) of the beloved's journey away from the poet. Here, by the poetic logic of association—the association of the beloved with rain and fertility—the clouds and rains take the place of the beloved, and it is their stations that are recounted.

The journey extends the parody as the poet declares himself to be shod at times and shoeless at others, a combination of two mutually exclusive movements: the journey of the tribal hero, accoutered and mounted on his camel mare, and the journey of the *su'lūk*, the brigand, barefoot, traveling without mount, engaging in night raids. Defrayal and subversion of the journey continues as rhetorically grand phrases (the setting out at dawn for the journey or hunt, the mention of a companion, usually sword, spear, or bow) are turned to wine song. Only the last three verses (beginning with the "back of the shield" simile used also in the *Lāmiyya* of Shānfara) are free of satirical play.

The poem ends with a missive boast: "To Yazid of the Bāni Shaybān bear this word." It is a powerful section built around a reference to the famous battle of the Bowbend, in which the poet's tribal confederation, the Bakr, defeated the Persians and their Arab allies. The fragility of linear perspective and verse order becomes especially acute in the boast. There is a high occurrence of textual variants and some hemistichs appear in more than one verse, a clear sign of textual instability. The breakdown of narrative closure and textual certainty—strong even by the standards of the oral, pre-Islamic tradition—is reflected by a similar breakdown of normal order in the battle. A woman, Futāyima, finds herself at the center of an attack, defended by the poet's tribe, rather than following the *bəduin* custom of watching the battle from a distance. A second woman, "the Jashiriyya," is mentioned within the context of battle taunts, but her role is never made clear. The enemy here turns out to be not so much the Persians, but the tribe of Abu Thubāyt which, like Al-A'sha's tribe, was part of the Bakr confederacy. Dissolution of normal boundaries of kin and enemy, self and other, is marked by an ever more urgent command to end the conflict, each command followed by the threat of more war. The use of parallelism becomes more dense, heightening the rhetorical intensity. At the moment of highest poetic pitch the poem refers to the enemy as that "tribe of ours" (*qāwmana*).

The missive boast and its distinctive version and vision of war, the vivid and textured imagery of the storm, and especially the appropriation of journey, hunt, and *su'lūk* themes by the bacchic and erotic world of wine song have made this poem one of the most memorable and most loved of the classical odes. It inaugurates a satirical tradition that will last at least until Abu Nuwās, the 'Abbasid wine poet celebrated for his night journey to the tavern, and his boasts of the power, nobility, and virtues (magical and heroic) of his wine.

Al-A'shā (the near-blind) was the nickname for Maymūn ibn Qays of the tribe of Bakr, clan of Qays ibn Tha'laba, who traveled widely, spent time at al-

Hira, became famous for satires and wine songs, lived on into early Islam, and is said to have shown stubborn reluctance to embrace the new, wine-banning religion.

I have not included the disputed verses 51–53, which consist of a listing of the tribes of Banī Asad, Qushayr, 'Abdallah, and Rabī'a as witnesses to the fighting ability of the poet's tribe.

The meter, like that of the ode of 'Alqama, is the *basīf*, with one important difference. In 'Alqama, each hemistich ends with a spondee, while this ode uses an anapestic variant (– ~ –). The anapest gives a metrical emphasis to the satire, as in the last hemistich of the first verse, where the lightness of the anapest in *rajulu* (man) contrasts, with comic effect, to the heavier feet and grand rhetoric of *ayyuhā* (O!), a contrast heightened further by the elision of the *hā* in *ayyuhā* with the trilled double *r* in *rajulu*:

– –      ~ – / ~ –    – / – – ~    – / ~ ~ –  
waddi'      hurayrata    inna r-rakba murtahilū  
bid farewell to Hurāyra, the riders are departing  
~ –      ~ – / ~ ~ – / ~    ~ ~ – / ~ ~ –  
, wa hal      tuṭīqu wadā'an    ayyuhā r-rajulū  
and can you    bear farewell, O    man (that you are).

A similar effect can be found in the next line with *maṣqūlun awāriduhā* (gleaming—her side teeth), the anapest giving an exaggerated emphasis to the long open *wā* in *awāriduhā*.

Translator's divisions: first *nasīb* movement; second *nasīb* movement—the chain of mismatched lovers; the storm; the journey, *su'lūk* journey, and journey as wine song; missive boast.

## *Bid Huráyra Farewell*

Bid Huráyra farewell.  
The riders are departing.  
Can you, man that you are,  
bear bidding farewell?

Brow aglow, hair flowing,  
a gleam from the side teeth as she smiles,  
she walks gently as a gazelle,  
tender-hoofed in wet soil,

As if her walk  
from the tent of a neighbor  
were the gliding of a cloud  
neither slow nor hurried.

You hear her anklets whisper  
as she turns away  
like cassia rustling  
suppliant in the breeze.

She's not one of those  
whose neighbors hate to see her face.  
You won't find her,  
ear to their secrets, listening.

She braces herself  
or she'd be thrown back flat,  
when rising to visit a neighbor,  
by languor.

She entertains her companion awhile,  
then slackens,  
lower back and buttocks  
quivering.

Full at the bodice,  
at the waist sash nil,  
a belle, seeming as she comes near  
to divide in two.

How sweet a bedmate  
on a cloudy afternoon,  
not for some unbathed rude  
to lay and take some pleasure,

Wide-hipped, delicate,  
elbows soft, walk tender,  
as if a thorn were caught  
in the arch of her sandal.

As she rises  
a fragrance of musk trails,  
her sleeve-cuffs with the scent  
of rose jasmine brimming over.

No meadow of the meadows  
of the roughland plateau,  
luxuriant and green, blessed  
by dark-trailing big-dropped clouds,

Where the sun is teased  
by a blossom in full flower,  
drenched in color,  
mantled deep in rushes and greens,

Is ever more fragrant,  
more redolent  
than she, or more beautiful  
when evening shadows fall.

---

Huráyra said  
when I came to pay her call  
woe to you, woe,  
you woesome male!

I fell for her by chance.  
She fell for another  
who fell for another  
other than her,

For him a girl was falling  
he didn't desire,  
while a cousin on her father's side  
was weakening for her, and dying.

Then for me there fell another,  
not to my liking,  
love in love on love,  
beside itself, entangled, mad,



Each of us afflicted,  
raving to this friend or that,  
approaching, backing off,  
ensnared, ensnaring.

Huráyra shut us off,  
not speaking,  
ignorance on the part of Umm Khuláyd  
of the bond she tied.

Didn't she see a man,  
night-blind, wounded  
by intimations of death shades  
and by time, the demented, the undoing?

Have you seen it blocking the horizon?  
I passed the night in watch,  
lightning kindled along its edges,  
flickering,

With a dark trail behind it,  
its middle full and moving,  
girded and held together  
by buckets of rain.

No play diverts me  
from foretelling the rain's direction,  
no pleasure from a cup of wine,  
no languor.

I told them at Dúrna,  
the drinkers, already sodden:  
Foretell! But how  
can a wine-faced drinker heed?

Lightning lit up the slopes  
where the rain would fall,  
in Khabíyya, a blackening cloud  
against the horizon.

They said let it pour  
on Leopard Streak and Camel Belly,  
on Horse Trappings, Tired Man,  
and Legland,

Flowing over the Edgelands,  
then Boar with its tracts  
of rock and sand,  
until the hills and mountains burst,

Until the grouse meadows  
and the tree-hedged  
soft-curved dunes  
take all they can bear,

A gushing, quenching draught  
for abodes long since desolate,  
off the track  
shunned by horse and camel mare.

You may well find me barefoot,  
not a scrap of shoe leather to my name.  
Wearing boots or shoeless,  
that's the way I am.

I might well steal upon  
some master of his house  
and catch him unawares. Wary once,  
now he finds no haven.

I might one day lead the reins  
of youthful passion,  
and it might follow,  
a hot-blooded love-talker at my side.

Many's the time I have set out at dawn  
to the wine shop,  
followed by a bob-skewing, quick-witted,  
path-wise fast-hander,

In a crowd of men like Indian swords  
who know that everyone,  
barefoot or bootshod,  
will perish.

I rivaled them down for the snip of basil,  
head on elbow, reclining,  
and for a tangy wine  
from a porous, moistened jug of clay.

They don't come to  
while there is any of it left,  
except to call for more  
after a third round or after a second,

The glass-bearer  
busying here and there,  
shirt bottom tucked up,  
alert, agile.

How many a song—you'd think it sung  
to a Persian harp—  
when a singing girl in a nightslip  
sings it,

How many a gowned lady,  
trailing silk,  
how many a girl  
with a leather wine flask at her side,

Have I spent my time enjoying,  
enduring trial  
by amorous talk  
and length of pleasure.

How many a land  
like the flat back of a shield,  
wild, where jinn are overheard  
in the corners, rustling,

That no one dares enter,  
riding upon the burning heat,  
except one who, in what he undertakes,  
is unhurried,

Have I cut through  
on a well-worn, rock-ribbed,  
easy-gaited mare, elbows well apart  
when you show her.

---

To Yazíd of the Báni Shaybán  
bear this word:  
Abu Thubáyt,  
stop gnawing at your heart!

Stop carving at the grain  
of our ancient name  
that nothing can harm  
as long as burdened camels groan,

Like a mountain goat  
butting against a rock  
to split it, the rock unharmed,  
the horns weakening.

I know you well  
when the battle signal calls us,  
when war blazes  
with arms, night raids, and plunder.

You inflame Mas'úd's kin  
and his brothers against us,  
sowing destruction when we meet,  
then drawing away.

Don't sit alone  
when you've stoked the fire!  
You'll implore refuge one day  
from its burning, praying.

There were among the people of Kahf,  
when they fought, and the Jashiriyya,  
those who were quick,  
those who would take their time.

You claimed we wouldn't fight you.  
We are—tribe of ours!—  
for the likes of you,  
the killers,

Until the chief of the tribe  
lies fallen, head on arm,  
protected by child-bereft women's  
flailing hands,

Struck down by an Indian sword  
well aimed toward its target,  
or a supple, well-tempered spear  
from Khatt.

We might well spear the chieftain  
in the hollow of his thigh,  
and a champion might perish  
on our spear tips, unavenged.

End it!  
Nothing curbs the overbearing  
like a gaping wound  
unstaunched by oil and gauze.

By the life of the one  
to whom stamping camels  
and long-horned cattle of every kind  
are led in offering,

Kill a chief  
who never stood in your way  
and we'll kill one of yours  
like him, one to our choosing.

Try us. You won't find us  
after the battle  
from the tribe's blood-right  
turning away.

Under the noon sun,  
the day of the Bowbend,  
around Futáyma, we were the riders,  
not shirking, not giving way.

They called for a mounted attack.  
We said we can do that.  
They prepared to fight on foot.  
We're a tribe that fights unmounted.

## Dhu al-Rúmma

### *To the Encampments of Máyya*

By the second century of Islam, the classical tradition of Arabic poetry was on the verge of a major change. Poetry was now composed in the new cities of Islam rather than in the deserts of the bedouin. The new religion, writing, philosophy, and the multicultural world of the city were among the converging pressures that were to bring about the first major transformation of the *qasida*.

The poetry of Ghaylán ibn 'Uqba, nicknamed Dhu al-Rúmma, marks the boundary of the ancient tradition. It remains close enough to the spirit of the bedouin *qasida* to have earned its author the title "seal of the classical poets." Yet it also reflects the turn to a new era. The words "desire" and "love" (*háwa* and *hubb*) appear far more frequently than in earlier poetry, for example. This direct expression of emotion is accompanied, paradoxically, by a new sense of indirection in syntax and diction. The verb *káda* ("nearly" or "almost" in verbal form) appears at moments of emotional intensity.

A combination of intensity and indirection is reflected in the poem's structure as well as in its language. Between the *nasīb* and the journey, there is a long section with three separate lines that could serve as a transition. In syntax, vocabulary, and imagery, the three are virtually identical. All refer to Máyya as being behind a veil of desert. The mention of the desert would normally mark the beginning of the journey, but in the first two cases the poet-hero slips back into remembrance of Máyya.

The existence of a critical space between the poet and the beloved is central to the poem, but the geographical positions of Máyya and the poet are undefined. There is only a vague reference to her changing the aim of her journey and to the condition of her abode. In the second case the emphatic "right there" (*hátika*) underlines the fact that we have no idea where "there" is. Nor do we know if the poetic persona is actually standing over the abode or only imagining himself to be there. The poet seems to lose himself in the temporal and spatial discontinuities that mark the *nasīb*-journey frontier.

Dislocation reaches its extreme when the rider, intoxicated from heat, mirage, and remembrance of Máyya, sways as if from the ropes of a well. Instead of a clearly defined past time and topography, there is only the

memory of the beloved. Instead of a clearly defined intention or *hímma*, there is only a vague movement toward the lost past. Máyya becomes the beginning of the journey and the end—and the guide. Yet whenever the poet focuses his gaze upon her she vanishes. What at first seems to be a description of her turns into metamorphosis. She disappears into a landscape of wet dunes, desert torrents, deep abysses, camomile petals covered by night dew, and earth-soaked fragrance of the oasis breeze.

She is an affliction. Love for her is personified subtly, bringing to mind the *tayf*, the nightly apparition of the departed lover. This obsessional eroticism echoes the Medinan 'údhri love poetry associated with Jamil and Majnún Láyla, and foretells similar themes in the later Andalusian poetry of Ibn Zaydún and Ibn Khafája. In the final account it is the desert animals that are portrayed as existing with solidity. We leave the poem with clear images of the vulnerability of gazelle and fawn, the motion of the riding camels ("fleet roans"), the endurance of the "bite-scarred rough-flank" (onager), a glimpse of the "black-horn" (oryx bull), the monumental yet dynamic form of the *nāqa*: the perduring world that preceded the life of the poet and will continue on after his death.

The poem ends not with a boast, but with a return to the remembrance of the beloved who is both disease and cure. She is many-guised (*dhātu alwānin*), an epithet that is the matrix of a rich set of associations. Time as fate (*dahr*) was called the many-guised, changing, wearing down all things, playing with human aspirations. The desert was many-guised, mirage-filled, leading the journeyer from tract into tract, devouring him. These meanings were personified in the *ghul*, that female jinni often called simply "the many-guised," the multiformed and changing-in-form beguiler of the desert traveler who leads him off the path to his destruction. Through the lightest and most subtle play upon this epithet the poet has evoked and united these associations. In the final complaint, the referent for "she-with-many-guises" is itself multivalent. The immediate antecedent is the beloved, but another antecedent is the mirage-filled desert of the journey, and, beyond that, fate. The term *dhātu alwānin* (she-with-many-guises) is also an inversion of the poet's nickname, *dhu al-rúmma* (he-with-a-cord-of-rope), the poet-hero attempting to bind the many-guised and constantly changing into a stable and secure world.

The end of the ode suggests that the transition to and through the journey has not been completed. There is no reintegration with tribal society. Dhu al-Rúmma, like the *su'lúk*, is passed from desert to desert, but rather than wandering ever further from the tribe, he wanders ever deeper into remembrance. By the end of the poem, the remembrance of the beloved and the journey, the temporal movement back through

time and the journey across the spatial expanse of the desert, are one movement.

Dhū al-Rumma, one of the most famous of the poets of the Umayyad Caliphate, is said to have died *circa* 117 H./735 C.E., and to have taken part in the rivalry between the two poet-satirists, al-Farazdaq and Jarīr, and in the controversies between the grammatical schools of Basra and Kūfa. Ghaylān and Mayya (alternatively, Māī) are among the more famous pairs of lovers in the Arabic tradition. For a discussion of the 'Udhri tradition of love poetry, see As'ad Khairallah, *Love, Madness, and Poetry: An Interpretation of the Majnūn Legend* (Beirut: Beirut Texts and Studies, 1980).

The meter, like that of Shanfarā's *Lāmiyya*, is the *ṭawīl*:

~ ~ / ~ ~ ~ ~ / ~ ~ ~ ~ / ~ ~ ~ ~  
 a manzilatay mayyīn salāmun 'alaykumā  
 ~ ~ ~ ~ / ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ / ~ ~ ~ ~ / ~ ~ ~ ~  
 'alā n-na'yi wa n-nā'i yawaddu wa yanṣaḥū

Translator's divisions: first *nasīb* section; second *nasīb* section—the metamorphosis; *nasīb*-journey transition; the *nāqa* Ṣaydah; the onager ("bite-scarred rough-flank"); conclusion.

## *To the Encampments of Máyya*

To the encampments of Máyya,  
both of you,  
a well-meant word  
and distant greeting:

May the rain-star Arcturus  
be over you still . . .  
and the rains of the Pleiades,  
pouring down and spreading,

Though it was you  
who stirred a lover's  
disheartened desire,  
until the eye shed

Tears, yes, that nearly,  
on knowing a campsite as Máyya's,  
if not released,  
would have killed,

Though I was already nearing thirty  
and my friends had learned better  
and good sense had begun  
to weigh down folly.

When distance turns other lovers,  
the first premonition  
of loving Máyya  
will still be with me.

Nearness to her  
cannot impoverish desire,  
nor distance, wherever she might be,  
run it dry.

The inner whisper  
of memory,  
reminiscence of Máyya,  
is enough to bruise your heart.

Desires have their way,  
circulate freely,  
but I can't see your share of my heart  
given away.

Though in parting some love  
is effaced and disappears,  
yours in me is made over  
and compounded.

You came to mind  
when a doe ariel passed us,  
right flank turned to the camel mounts,  
neck lowered,

A doe of the sands, earth-hued,  
with a white blaze on the forehead  
and the forenoon sun  
clear upon her back.

She leaves her fawn  
on a dune, a grassy dune  
in Múshrif, the glance of her eye  
gleaming around him,

Gazing at us as if we intended harm  
where we would meet him,  
approaching us,  
then backing away.

She is her like, in shoulder,  
neck and eye,  
but Máyya is more radiant than she, still—  
more beautiful.

---

After sleep she is languor.  
The house exudes her fragrance.  
She adorns it  
when she appears in the morning,

As if her anklets and ivory  
were entwined around a calotrope  
stopping the water's flow  
in the bed of a wadi,

With buttocks like a soft dune  
over which a rain shower falls  
matting the sand  
as it sprinkles down,

Her hair-fall  
over the lower curve of her back,  
soft as the moringa's gossamer flowers,  
curled with pins and combed,

With long cheek hollows  
where tears flow,  
and a lengthened curve at the breast sash  
where it crosses and falls.

You see her ear pendant  
along the exposed ridge of her neck,  
swaying out,  
dangling over the abyss.

With a red thornberry tooth-twig,  
fragrant as musk and Indian ambergris  
brought in in the morning,  
she reveals

Petals of a camomile  
cooled by the night  
to which the dew has risen at evening  
from Ráma oasis,

Wafting in on all sides  
with the earth scent of the garden,  
redolent as a musk pod  
falling open.

The white gleam of her teeth,  
her immoderate laugh,  
almost, to the unhearing  
speak secrets.

She is the cure, she the disease,  
memory of her, misgiving,  
desire dead  
were it not for the affliction of distance.

---

Far-flung!  
her tribe cut off  
behind biting winds  
that scour the hard ground.

How many a crow,  
cawing separation,  
like a highborn Nubian woman  
wailing the dead,

Has confirmed my foreboding,  
Máyya changing direction,  
striking fire  
with the staff of parting.

Let the spouse of Máyya weep  
that purebred camels kneel  
worn out at the end of night  
before the house of Mai.

Die miserably  
husband of Mai!  
Hearts belonging to Máyya  
are free of blemish, pure.

Had they left her a choice,  
she would have chosen well.  
One like Máyya does not belong  
with the likes of you.

As if I sleep on a bed of awls  
while her spouse sleeps,  
stretched out,  
on a sandy hillock.

When I say Máyya is near  
the desert stretches out,  
dust-hued,  
as far as the eye can see.

Mai has packed up and gone.  
Right there is her abode!  
Left to the limping crow  
and ring-necked dove.

When I complained to Máyya of love  
that she might reward me  
for my affections, she said:  
You're not being serious!

Keeping me off,  
leading me on,  
when she saw that the specter of love  
had almost made off with my body.

---

How many a noonday heat,  
far from Mai,  
the pace of my thick-humped mare unbroken,  
the black-white locusts twitching

In pathless wastelands  
whose stillness  
in the mirage of forenoon and midday  
almost blots out the gaze,

As if the flat hill summits  
were entwined in pure silk  
parting at times to reveal them,  
then sewed back,

When the chameleon  
struck by the heat  
begins to twist his head  
and reel—

How many a rider  
drunk on sleeplessness  
as if swaying from the two ropes  
of a concave well

Have I shaken from his stupor  
as he nodded his head  
like a staggering drinker  
after his last drop of wine.

When he expires in the saddle  
I bring him back to life  
with your memory. The fleet roans  
lean to their gallop.

When the end of the whip frays  
and the bodies of the camels  
are worn to sickles  
then Sáydah besets them.

---

She has stubby ears  
and a long upper nape,  
a cheek polished  
like the mirror of a foreign lady,

The eyes of a black-horn,  
solitary,  
lips like Yemeni leather  
that flap loosely when she paces,

A leg like the shadow of a wolf,  
stride met  
by the lower foreleg  
twisted out wide by the shinbone,

At full gallop  
when the black of night  
is parted from the riders  
by the pale horizon of dawn.

When I call out "aaj!"  
or intone the camel driver's song  
she lifts a tail like under-wing feathers  
as if pregnant or false-pregnant.

You see her  
when I have imposed upon her  
every hardship, before the trail camels,  
their forelegs pulling in air,

Her legs surging,  
body lunging,  
wary of threats,  
head raised,

Tawny, towering,  
as if a bite-scarred rough-flank  
bore me in the saddle  
through the empty regions.

---

He turns the herd,  
driving and urging, their flanks  
like boulder-strewn ground  
in a field of brush grass.

They grazed dry pastures  
until they became as thin  
as well-straightened spear shafts  
from Khatt.

Until there came a day  
when in their sand hollows  
ostrich eggs  
nearly split in the blaze.

He continued to beguile them,  
as they stood, thirst-parched,  
as if on the crowns of their heads  
were a flock of birds,

On a promontory  
at the dust hour  
when locusts expire  
from the force of heat.

You see the wind play  
where she travels at nightfall  
between her and what she will find  
where she arrives at dawn.

As if the camels  
through the far-flung, trackless barrens  
were boats floating  
in the desert of the Tigris.

My heart refused everything  
but memory of Máyya.  
She-with-many-guises, playful and serious,  
troubled it.

## Glossary

Arabic terms are given first with English accents and then with formal, Arabic transliteration, based upon vowel quantity.

*ahwál* (*aḥwāl*): conditions, stances, or moods; the shifting moods or attitudes of the beloved vis-à-vis the lover.

*atlál* (*aṭlāl*): the abodes, marks, and traces of the beloved's abandoned campsite.

*baliyya* (*baliyya*): the ghost mare, the fallen hero's *náqa*, tethered to his tomb and abandoned.

*dhikr* (*dhikr*): remembrance, of the beloved, of one's relationship with the divine (Qur'anic), of the divine beloved (Sufi).

*diwán* (*dīwān*): the collection of poetry ascribed to a single author.

*fakhr* (*fakhr*): the boast, the third major movement of the qasida, often including wine song, *náqa* sacrifice, depiction of the poet-hero on horseback, battle-boast and tribal boast.

*ghul* (*ghúl*): a female species of jinn associated with constant change of form, the changing moods of the beloved, the changing patterns of the desert that devour the traveler, the changes of time that wear down and wear away aspirations. The hair-covered, grave-robbing *ghul* of the Arab folktale tends to be male, more stable in form, easier to please than the *ghul* of poetry.

*hilm* (*ḥilm*): foresight, self-command, trail sense, ability to follow through on plans; the primary pre-Islamic virtue.

*jahl* (*jahl*): the opposite of *hilm*; the uncontrolled jumping of a young horse; recklessness, impetuosity, the tendency to take on endeavors, conflicts, or relationships unprepared. Pre-Islamic Arabia was called by early Muslims the *jahiliyya* (age and place of *jahl*), with *jahl* transformed into the sense of moral and religious ignorance.

*jinni*, pl. *jinn* (*jinnī*, *jinn*): semi-spirits of the desert, associated with love, madness, and poetic inspiration.

*karīm* (*karīm*): an untranslatable term usually rendered as "generous" or "noble": the centerpiece of tribal ethos, symbolized through the *náqa* sacrifice and the feeding of the tribe, the unflinching defense of the clan in battle, the lavish wine bouts and banquets, and, in a more



abstract sense, the refusal to hoard one's life. The Qur'an gave the *karīm* a more ethical and religious dimension, but maintained its centrality as a human ideal.

*maqāmāt* (*maqāmāt*): stations of a journey; stations of the beloved's journey away from the poet.

*māysir* (*maysir*): a ritual lottery played with arrow shafts through which the slaughtered *nāqa* is apportioned; a game with symbolic associations concerning fate.

*mu'allaqāt* (*mu'allaqāt*): the "suspended ones," a famous collection of poetry, with various versions comprising between seven and ten poems. Legend maintains that they were hung from the walls of the pre-Islamic Ka'ba after poetry competitions at the fair of 'Ukáz.

*nāqa* (*nāqa*): the camel mare, the poet-hero's mount during the journey and sacrificial victim during the major pre-Islamic rite, the *nāqa* sacrifice. The *nāqa* is almost always referred to through epithets ("the journey worn," "the Shadaniyyan," "the night courser," etc.).

*nasīb* (*nasīb*): remembrance of the lost beloved, the first section of the *qasida*.

onager: the Arabian species of wild ass, a major symbolic figure in the *qasida*, almost always mentioned by epithet ("sheen-of-udder," "white-belly," "bite-scarred rough-flank").

oryx: the white Arabian oryx (now being reintroduced to Arabia after several centuries of extinction). This particularly elegant species of antelope with long cylindrical horns becomes a central symbolic figure in the *qasida*, almost always mentioned through epithets ("wide-of-eyes," "wild one," "flat-nosed one").

*raḥīl* (*raḥīl*): the journey, the second major movement of the *qasida*.

*sirr* (*sirr*): secret or mystery; the secret of the beloved-lover relation; the secret or mystery of destiny; the mystery of the divine being (Qur'anic); one's interior, unmanifest, real self (Sufi).

*su'lūk* (*su'lūk*): a brigand or outcast; a particular kind of *qasida* composed in the voice of the brigand.

*tayf* (*tayf*): the beloved's night apparition to the poet.

*za'n* (*za'n* or *ḏha'n*): the departure of the beloved and the women in her tribe and the depiction of their howdahs, the richly decorated litters carried on camel stallions.

## Wesleyan Poetry in Translation

### from Arabic

*Desert Tracings: Six Classic Arabian Odes* by 'Alqama, Shānfarā, Labīd, 'Antara, Al-A'sha, and Dhu al-Rūmma. 1989. Translated and introduced by Michael A. Sells.

### from Bulgarian

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