

A Selection of Poems

by

Ahmad Nadim Qasmi
(Aḥmad Nadīm Qāsimī)
(1916-2006)

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From: *Dasht-i vafā* (Desert of Fidelity). Lāhaur: Kitāb Numā. 1964.

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Abbreviations: *DV 1964* = *Dasht-i vafā 1964 ed.*

DV 2012 = *Dasht-i vafā 2012 ed.*

IK = *Intikhāb-i kalām aḥmad nadīm qāsimī*

JoJ = *Jalāl o jamāl*

SG = *Sho ‘lah-yi gul*

001

1. *Andekhā maḥbūb* / Unseen Beloved

When, hidden among thick branches, some sparrow sings,
 Why does a spark of longing flare up in my heart?
 When I see beautiful cattle grazing in pastures,
 Why do I then go on searching for sober scenes?
 When, at dawn, women go out to the well
 And when they mimic, by clapping, the rhythm of reddish clay pots,
 For whom do I go searching in desolate palaces?
 For whom do I come back after I have kissed the broken balcony?
 Suddenly, when the cuckoo's call rises through the languid night,
 Why does an imaginary pang invade in my heart?
 When, on cold nights, stars flicker upon the sky,
 Of what Venus-like form do I dream?
 Who is fluttering those eyes again and again within the stars?
 Whose reflection is this in the poppy-field of sunset?
 She becomes a pearl, then shines in reddish mother-of-pearl;
 In the garden, she becomes a rose and hibiscus, and then gives off fragrance;
 Sometimes she hides in the camphor lamp, then shines;
 Sometimes she becomes clouds and spreads over the wilderness and fields,
 Sometimes in dreadful battles, sometimes in peaceful cities,
 Sometimes in the careless waving of a fluttering scarf,
 Sometimes in the moldy begging bag of destitute girls,
 Sometimes in the broken lisplings of children's innocent speech,
 Sometimes in saddened eyes, sometimes in bright lamps,
 Sometimes in clay cups, sometimes in crystal goblets.
 Becoming intoxication, someone is engulfing my dreams;
 Wherever you look, she beckons with faint signs.

1938

JoJ, 225

002

2. *Bārish* / Rain

Last night rain knocked so incessantly on the prison roof
That its sound, becoming an echo. cut through the stagnant darkness
Spreading and contracting everywhere.
I swear by these ramparts raising their heads, I thought
That, in the prison corner,
All the roads of life are closed;
But today, life sings, even in this lock-closed land.
Beauty calls the artist even in this stone-steel fort.

December 1958

DV 1964, 158

With Munibur Rahman

003

3. *Bahār ā'egī* / Spring Will Come

Bahār ā'egī is quoted in full in [Urdu Poetry, 1935-1970](#)

I complain not only of the garden's destruction,
 But even find very few stars in the sky.
 Be it an evening sunset or a morning dawn,
 I find very few springs in all scenes;
 The body says: You should touch the horizon;
 The mind says: You will find very few supports to do that.
 I have reached here from foreign paths, but
 I have not yet learned to be at ease in this gathering.
 Having become fragrance, I even kept on floating in the cage, too;
 For had I become color, I would have been imprisoned;
 Darkness of the farmer's cell remained before;
 I did not learn how to be the lamp in a king's chamber.
 O you who say my destination is beyond the horizon!
 I have looked from one horizon to the other and saw no one;
 If there were one center, then seeking would seem to have some
 promise,
 But the earth goes on revolving in innumerable circles;
 The echo of new horizons comes at every horizon:
 "Your destination is somewhere, somewhere very far."
 What does the traveler now have to do with the new ambitions of
 travelling;
 Now my banner will be waved upon this very place.
 In this desert, to adorn the garden
 My feelings will become my mirror;
 I will raise such a storm that
 The farmer will emerge from his coffin.
 The ray of the sun will crack open the frozen fog,
 Will alight in the heart of this mist;
 Shadows will shrink lest darkness be hurt;
 Darkness will desire but will not find refuge.
 Spring will come to this age with such force
 That gardens will bloom from the heat of the bosom of stones.

1948

SG, 112-14

004

4. *Fikr* / Thought

In night's expansive silence,
When the moon feels drowsy
And branches bend with the weight of flowers
Create an atmosphere of lullabies;

When, mingling in the lake's mirror
The gait of the stars has been lost,
Every tree seems a picture
And every flower a question;

When, from the earth to heaven's heights,
The wrinkle of Time unfurls,
When the silence of centuries
Has pitched its tent from my thought to God,

Then on my burning heart
Someone sprinkles dew
And from the divine chamber
Someone calls out to Man.

December 1953

2012, 74-75

DV

05 **5. Ghazal: Āfāq nihān hai / Ghazal: If the horizon is hidden**

glance.

If the horizon is hidden, then let's speak of the limitation of the

If the stars drown, then let's speak of dawn.

Let us speak of space, of ocean and land;
Paradise is very far above; let us speak of our home.

roses;

Let us make autumn run over with the smell of flowers and

If spring has not come, let us speak of green.

evil;

My dear sir, you speak of the philosophy of good and

As for us, we care only to test the greatness of Man.

Who will pluck stars with hands covered with wounds?
Come, let us speak of the dust on the road!

202-203

SG,

Translator's Note: Page 202 in this text is incorrectly written 102.

006 **6. Ghazal: I'jāz hai yih / Ghazal: This is a miracle**

This is the miracle of your scattered, careless glances;
Do not put the blame of madness on love.

She's not playing the right role in the affair;
She's as responsible for problems of love as love is.

This melancholy youth lost in thought—
Perhaps it is a new style of showing oneself to lovers.

Your coming at this time into my narrow room of sorrow
Is as unexpected as the lost gust of the morning breeze.

I am asking you the address of your lane;
My doing this shows the world of my unawareness.

This floor which has echoed with your dancing
Is the highest heaven of my vision.

His high vision does not seek God,
But only the ground where her feet dance.

O stars of dawn tossing about in fog,
I am grateful to you for your consolation.

1941

349-50

JoJ,

007

7. *Ghazal: Phir bhayānak tīragī meṅ /*
Ghazal: Again, we came in a horrible darkness

Again, we came in horrible darkness;
 We were deceived by the sounding of the hour.

Ah! How our dreams can create gardens!
 As soon as we opened our eyes, the garden withered.
 Who was it who, near the destination,
 Had spread sheets of mirrors?

Their coming was nothing less than a doomsday;
 And when they left, they created havoc again.

Again, that very system of counting stars!
 We're fed up with this repetition.

Those whirlwinds we thought to be
 The spring cloud—how many gardens did they ravish.

While they kept on hiding the purpose
 Of man's evolution, we found it anyway.

Now only a typhoon will bring the dawn, for
 When the sun arose, the clouds turned dark.

SG, 194-95

008

8. *Insān / Man*

God. is great, the land is great, the times are great; if someone here is lowly,
 then it is only Nadim,
 That very Nadim, that very darling of Paradise, that Nadim who was the
 angels' object of worship,
 He who raised the rapture of knowledge above predestination, he who made

the world's vastness in a single leap;
 He who, when punished for the crime of love, then brought spring to the
 wilderness of the universe;
 He who gave the beauty of heaven to earth, who smiled and brushed aside the
 aggressive elements;
 When he advanced, then he carved out roads; when he flew, he spread song;
 when he bowed, he made flowers bloom;
 He by whose name greatness swears is being made fun of by God's creation
 today.

My nature is not to get angry with anyone, with no one; there are gardens in
 my nature, not heaps of fire.
 I have smiled at thousands of defeats; I've also hummed in the face of
 misfortune;
 If I meet death in the house of immortality, then in this very death I learn the
 etiquette of immortality;
 I am one who knows God and one who knows himself; I am also far from
 God, but I am also near God;
 My work is also creation on this very earth because my name is ascribed to
 [God's epithet] Greatness;
 The earth is mine, the air as well, and also space; if space is mine, then the
 kingdom beyond is also mine.
 I am the greatest piece of art of God's mind; I am the groom of every age; I
 am Nadim.

1947

April,

36-37

SG,

009

9. *Is daur men* / In this age

My every couplet is, in reality, a history of a nation;
 I swear by my world-wanderings His universality.
 The world calls that free man, who in this age

every soul
 Is a seeker of justice and munificence, mad.
 Even the Greatest Creator Who still lives in the solitude of

Is called the idol of our imagination.
 That poet who is holding a pen of gold
 Solves the problems of poverty.
 Every person is avoiding the hard facts;
 Every person lives the practice of shying away.
 Nothing new in emotions; no breadth in ideas;
 In writing, no beauty; in discourse, no strength.
 Ambition of newborn youth is chilled
 And old age is goaded down with the heavy burden of sorrow.
 That thing which is written in Western books
 Is, in the eyes of the East, equal to the Quran.
 Permission of laws is deeded to live!
 My God, this is tyranny, tyranny!

1941

IK, 18-19

010

10. Kal aur āj / Yesterday and Today

Yesterday, in every step we used to feel that the good world had finally arrived;
 Today, every difficult destination is a message to move on.
 Yesterday, every rejection was grave impertinence and the destruction of Time;

Today, every false step is proof of Man's greatness;
 Yesterday, sultans' authority was political games;
 Today, the farmer is the guarantor the formation of law.
 Yesterday, that height where orders for killing were given
 Today is contemptible in the masses' eyes.
 Yesterday, that which lit Nimrod's imperialism, that fire from hell,
 Is today Abraham's garden.
 Whereas fear of Cain permeated everyone's heart yesterday,
 The blood of Abel [anger] has risen in the eyes today.
 Yesterday the foreigners' red face was the touchstone of beauty;
 Today, the Abyssinian is also thought a beautiful creation of God.
 Yesterday, poor, helpless lamentations were banners of patriotism;
 Today, in our mind there is no distinction of Tigris, Ganges or Nile.
 Yesterday, the edge of that ocean which was searched by

Columbus

Today is a shrunken, shriveled lake.
 Yesterday, a beautiful thought was just a matter of curly hair and cheeks;
 Today, the history of labor is thought a beautiful thing.
 Yesterday, those orders which fell on Adam as calamities and hurt Man
 Today, Nature obeys them;
 Today, Man is at the highest point to which
 Not even Gabriel's imagination, not to mention his wings, has risen.

1945

IK, 32-34

011

11. *Kāravān* / Caravan

The music of the caravan bell, informer of the caravan's pace;

The caravan bell's silence, marker of the caravan's standstill;
 The caravan bell's lamentation, teller of an uncompleted journey.
 No harmony, no roaring were heard, nor was night's lamentation in our fate.

A few robbers had been going by somewhere; O friend, when was this ever a caravan?
 The stink of a rotten corpse was in the heart, though respect for religion was on their lips;
 They would cry "Life! Life!" but eating the dead was their old practice.
 The star we saw in their eyes was, in fact, a burning.

Why be concerned about the melody of the caravan?
 Let us be at least concerned with finding its tracks first.
 That lamp of firm resolution whose flame points out the way—at least let that be found first.
 Silence is in deep thought; a snow flake is falling;

All about, stars are falling stars; in every direction spiders weave their webs;
 Suddenly, a wave arose in the silence, like someone singing out in sleep,
 Like a crescent in piled-up clouds, like poppies in the desert's lap.
 O you who are waiting for the caravan bell!

If you can hear the sound of the steps, then listen!
 These hundreds of thousands of foot prints, these flowers,
 If you can pluck them with your glance, pluck them.
 Steel thundering in the factory is making flaming speeches in its frenzy of creation;

Field, mine, broken mountain range; yes, these are the very marks of the caravan.
 Those in whose direction a world is watching have passed on this very path;
 Due to them, there is an impulse to grow on the land; due to them, life sings songs;
 Their creation is the pivot of culture; life is easy from their work;

Their past is dusty, their future, a young sun.
 The circle of robbers is already broken; if you prepare for the journey, we can go.
 Comrades, if you are able to rise up from the dreadful swamp of blood, we can go.
 You who wait for the caravan bell, if you can hear the moving footsteps, then we can go.

012

12. *Khushk patte* / Dry Leaves

When the wind blows a little quicker,
 The voice of the dry leaves comes forth:
 Dry leaves, the companions of my years;
 Dry leaves, the flowers of my loneliness;
 Dry leaves, the principles of my honor.
 The silence of the desolated garden
 Is as frightening as a corpse
 Which hangs in the arms of the night
 As if moonlight is its shroud;
 Death bubbling from every side,
 Death, walking, silently holding its breath
 Suddenly knocking at my mind.
 The dry leaves called me.
 Whether the garden remains desolate or flourishes,
 The mind should be free of the anxiety;
 That new gusts of wind will no more blow here
 And the things, wherever they are placed—
 You will see them there even on Doomsday.
 Whether it is the flower-season or the time of autumn
 When the wind blows more quickly,
 The footsteps of Time echo
 And the voices of the dry leaves come forth:
 We are near you, we are with you.
 We are the same—the companions of your years;
 We are the same—the flowers of your loneliness;
 We are the same—the principles of your honor.

October

1959

DV 1964,

191-92

With Munibur

Rahman

013

13. *Manzar o pasmanzar* / Landscape and Background

Scars of feeling burn
 Lamps light up in the mind
 Night is heavy, like a mountain
 The whole universe, silent
 When a tear sprouts from the eyelashes
 Earth's stagnation breaks up
 The cascade of a waterfall
 Wind sings in the trees
 Stars bathing in the lake
 Burn the water
 Fireflies have scattered in the valleys
 Landing in the foliage
 As if carrying ruined jungles in our eyes
 We are shattered by weariness
 Glances are overlaid by nights
 And grope for the road for centuries
 The landscape insists we smile
 But from where should we bring moisture to our lips?

August

1953

DV 2012,

30-31

With Munibur
Rahman

014

14. *Mashriq o maghrib* / East and West

I am the inhabitant of warm lands;
 How many seas away from the snow fields!
 In the plains, like a blister,
 Sets my mud hut;
 In the cracked door shutters
 And the near decay of its threshold
 The antiqueness of its architecture
 Is sitting like a desolation.
 The moonlit night of cold countries
 Reflected in blue snow
 And veiled in the hangings of its beams
 Comes like a romance;
 And the moonlight-lit night of warm lands
 Bearing on its naked back
 The utter silence or the fatigue of work
 Comes like a storm.

The dress of noon-cold countries
 Is such a thin sheet
 In whose folds the gold of the body
 Smiles like electric bulbs;
 And our dress, nakedness
 On which the sun strikes its beams
 With such anger
 That it leaves only an ash heap.

The values of beauty in warm lands
 For how many blind, ancient centuries,
 Having kindled the fires of their own bodies,

And becoming the smoke of their tresses,
 Are sitting round their bonfire,
 Its flames blazing,
 Burning rosebuds.

The youth of warm lands whose

Profession is love
 Drive the plow and sow seeds
 In earth burning in sunlight
 And then crying over fate.
 Ecstatic over their youth labor,
 The clusters laden with pearls,
 The more filled up they are,
 The more distant they become.

The wave of beauty and love
 In cold countries march in step with life,
 Like sky and space
 Hang over day and night;
 In the homes, in places of worship,
 Or by the roadside,
 Everywhere, in every place, and at every time
 Whenever beauty and love meet,
 The flowers of warm kisses unfold.
 How much warmth is there in cold countries?
 How much warmth of the body is there
 In cold countries, of souls, of ideas?
 Over warm lands a cold and dead silence cast
 Their shadow like a calamity.
 The consciousness of life in cold countries
 Adorns even a particle of dust.
 In warm lands, the feeling of death
 Goes on kicking life.
 O friend! In habitant of cold countries,
 Like the killer in the broken ruins
 Of this wasteland, I think:
 If I am only what I am,
 If I am the debris of my urges,
 If I am the grave of my longings.
 Then what is the justification of my living?
 O, what is the secret of this helplessness?

I think the moon, which has risen over my house,
 Will also peep into your hall.
 The earth where I stand
 Is pressing down, rising, bending.
 Under the blue ocean,
 And, becoming the earth of your country,
 Coddle your feet.
 I think: Whether my adverse state
 Is only the mischief of colors,
 Whether I am low only because
 The sun burns here,
 Whether you are great only because,
 From your windowpanes,
 When the sunbeam peeps in,
 The snow makes fun of it?
 Color and season are not the basis of life;
 Color is an angle of the sun;
 Season, just a facet of earth.

My sun is the color of my face;
 Our snow is the color of your face;
 You pine for my sun;
 I am restless for your snow.
 We are two travelers—our way is one.

(Incomplete)

DV 2012,

259-64

015

15. *Nāguzīr* / Unavoidable

Cobwebbed window; shadows on the balcony; spotted columns, bleakness on the ceiling.

Darkness, as if its arms flogging the air; some places dark, some with pale light.
 Here, the blows of ages show on overturned slabs of marble floor;
 Centuries' headings appear on doors with mirror-like finishes in the shape of scratches;
 Here, the scratches of the thrush's claw passed like leaves on flowing water.

Curtains in the windows, candles on the balcony, painted columns, light on the ceiling;
 Frank mentions of her tresses, cheek, lips; clean laughter, like cotton puffs.
 A dignified fragrance permeating the wrinkles of her dress, the atmosphere, the air;
 This soft form tightly held in the arms, elasticity like a young shoot's; deer's litheness.
 Here, pure wine is dancing in marble cups, like an incarnadine dawn.
 There, the banner of some foreign country crowds the mirror-covered wall;
 If only time could stop the old sun-chariot for only a moment,
 If only this experienced priest, the sun, could challenge the path of revolution—
 But to bolt about is in its fate; retreat is even a problem; to pause is hard.
 This traveler will rest on Judgment Day; the Day of Creation was its city; eternity, its destination.

If the highways of Time—this evening, this night, this dawn—are predestined,
 Then the foreigner's banner will burn from the glowing heat of the spinning wheel.

IK,

016

35-36

16. Pābandī / Bondage

My master has a grievance: Why should my truthfulness
 Open secrets?
 And, I ask: Why does your politics mix poison in art?
 I will never become that pearl which is, day and night,
 Raked up by the winds of the shore.
 It also happens that the bird stands up against the storm;
 If a drop spills on a blazing flame, even that drop will speak.

April 1954

2012, 44

DV

017

**17. Qadīm nāqidān-i fan kā paighām /
The Message of Ancient Art Critics***(For Modern Artists)*

Dwellers in darkness! Do not reveal the secret of darkness
 Lest crystal dream be shattered; do speak slowly
 Lest this life becomes poison; mix sleep in this wine flask
 And create pearls of dreams.

Let the ship of the mind float in the twisting-turning waves of dance;
 Let the jewel of knowledge dissolve into the bloody hollowness of the goblet;
 Let the treasury of honor be divided; let the bosom of feelings be opened.
 Why make blood and sweat one from such toil?

You should not make naked pictures of the lewdness of nude people;
 Put powder on ugly things; apply color.
 Why show what we've been hiding?
 Young man, come to your senses.

God only knows what your aim is; speak clearly; give up vagueness;

The world's work doesn't stop; fill your cup; don't worry about the end.
 Forsake ugly inspiration which might be the smell of cancerous sores.
 If you get wages, then stop working.

Guardians of law, sit on the ground guarding the highest heaven;
 Why get angry in vain? Man is mute; the king is deaf.
 Who will cross the broad, deep ocean for you?
 He who hesitates is lost.

Wise men declared that it is hard to fight fate,
 To pierce swords in the mountain's bosom,
 That ripe berries have to fall from the branch
 And rot, putrefy in filth.

Look, that storm arises; run, go hide in caves;
 The chamber shook; the lean-tos panted: Come back, come!
 Willful crying for a destination is trivial; leave the road; save yourself.
 Give me your hand.

Decide on something somehow; heed what we say;
 Why are you blinking your eyes reddened in anger? Why trembling?
 Steel hardness in your hands; sharp-edged lightning in your breath?
 There's the path we've given you. Now go!

1944

302-304

JoJ,

018

**8. *Qit..a* ' : *Kunj-i zindān paṛū soctā hūn* /
 Fragment: Lying in the corner of prison**

Lying in the corner of the prison, I think:
 How interesting the landscape must be;
 This moon shining through the prison bars
 Must have risen in your courtyard too.

December 1958

2012, 115

DV

019

19. *Qit..a*': *Yih hijr o vaşal ke mu 'ame* /

Fragment: These enigmas of separation and union

These enigmas of separation and union
 Are unknown to all but you;
 A night passed in centuries; several ages blew past
 In an instant.

1959

January

2012, 138

DV

020

20. Shafaq / Sunset

Every new generation casts a new idol—
 Then every new idol, new temple, new modes of worship.
 The conch has gone on being played; the colored lights being
 lit;

The soul has gone on melting; Man goes on being forlorn.
 Sapphire and topaz were turn down from the royal palaces;
 Helpless—the masses gulp down pebbles;
 The flower of charity changes into withered thorns;
 Golden reins tighten about parched mouths.
 On the other side of gold-brocaded veils, beauty went on being
 sold;

Love kept listening to the noise of clashing steel;
 Caravans have gone on being plundered; destinations being
 unknown;

The moon has gone on being extinguished;
 The imprisoned *chakora* bird has gone on staring blankly.
 Every new age came, carrying a hundred hopes in its lap;
 Life remained broken, wretched, helpless;
 One emperor got up; another emperor moved forward;
 From the day of creation, this earth has been caught in this
 cycle.

Suddenly the smoke-filled window made a rattling sound;
 The bright candle swelled up; the flame's tongue trembled;
 from the lowlands of shivering darkness arose
 The red glow, singing the song of a new dawn.
 The horizon's redness is the reflection of a new age;
 This decoration is for a new beauty;
 Low and high have come down to one level;
 Now which man has a claim of sovereignty?

1944

IK, 26-28

021

21. *Tārīkh* / History

Rocks, bending over the streets
 Earth's burned tongues—
 Gathering the sounds of centuries
 And folding themselves in the dust of ages,
 Seeing me advancing in the space—
 Speaks in the voice of silence:
 The fire of history is burning;
 Another tongue is coming forth.

August 1953

DV 2012, 32

Munibur Rahman

With

022

22. *Umīd kī kiran* / Ray of Hope

When the place of revelry became desolate,
 The world began to seer confounded;
 Flowers lay on the couch, crushed
 Like droplets of blood on lips;
 A heap of moths lay on the floor,
 A spot of rather dirty colors;
 When the candle's flame turned paled
 Like the reflection of death upon beauty.
 The tall arches, cold and silent;
 Life, an ascetic who wears a shroud on his shoulder;
 When the candle began to go out slowly,
 My feelings shuddered to awakening.

Inside this very house of revelry,
 Those very scenes will play again tomorrow.
 Dancing to the tune of the sarod,
 Love will pick flowers and smell them;
 People will sing carefree songs,
 They will mock death.
 Arms, entangled in arms, will sway in ecstasy.
 Glances will kiss arrow-glances.
 Long tresses will be scattered upon arms;
 The secrets of false pride will be exposed;
 Silk curtains will rustle;
 People will get tired and leave;

Differences are the foundation of the world—
 It does not enjoy monotony.
 While night yawns,
 The sounds of day are heard.
 As soon as some stem is broken,
 A new leaf-shoot comes forth.
 I have sacrificed body and soul for someone.
 I have taken the burden of selfness off my heart;
 Having lost everything, I have lost her too.
 That is, she's become someone else's.
 But feelings speak to me:
 The waterfall goes on changing its path.

1940

IK, 14-15

INTERVIEW

“Leslie A. Flemming Interviews Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi: A Friend and Colleague Reminisces.”

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Suggested Reading:

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