

SHERBET-I-MA'RIFA

W I N E O F G N O S I S

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by Zeshan Syed

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Sherbet-i-Ma'rifa

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PREFACE

Bismillah

I originally wrote this in 2010. The ritual prayers and meditations I was blessed to experience then had such a higher quality than anything I had done before that I began wondering how long I had been going through the motions.

I chronicled my feelings in this collection of 33 poems. The first third of the collection presents ritual prayer in a poetic light; the second third explores meditation; and the final third explores the perception of reality itself.

If one reads a poem a day from this book, in about a month the whole course can be completed. You can, of course, read all the poems in a single afternoon; but even after that perusal, I think these poems work best as they are sampled one by one during a period where you are praying and contemplating. Sip and savor them over time rather than chugging them.

I truly hope the poems revive a sense of purpose and love in your spiritual life.

Thus *Sherbet-i-Ma'rifa* is offered with a threefold hope: to sweeten your taste for ritual prayer; to deepen your meditations on The Divine; and to expand your understanding of you.

ZS

Chicago 2016

al-salaatu wa al-salaamu 'alaa rasoolillah, wa 'alaa aalihi, wa sahabihi ajma'een.

Introduction

Beyond the cosmos there are legends of your heart,
And stories of your soul that tell of how you ache.

Beyond the cosmos there are legends of your heart,
And lightning storms in heaven from *du'a* you make.

Beyond the cosmos there are legends of your heart,
And galaxies of sweetness that your love did bake.

Beyond the cosmos there are legends of your heart,
And rivers flowing from the tears you roused awake.

Beyond the cosmos there are legends of your heart,
Which hides a gnosis that makes universes quake.

Qibla

Wherever we may live upon the Earth,
Throughout the centuries that we traverse,
We give attention to a town of birth,
And harness space and time and universe;
Our daily, mortal, existential fun
Is obligated, though we choose. Yes, love
Is ninety-nine gold bands, and law just one
Dark band, but love's the less essential stuff.
Like planets in a supernova's lane,
Like Muslims ere the longitude of night,
Like goose bumps when you hear your lover's name,
Reaction—row on row—to laws of light.
 A wonder shall this discipline reveal:
 The lover's *Qibla* is surrender will.

Adhaan

The mystic call's not bell or horn, but voice;
Adhaan spreads from the heart, a lover's choice;
To which the slave responds and turns his face;
And flies with steady movements to the place
That's spread for ecstasy, a noble use.

And if, arriving for your share of grace,
You must await the start, do not abase
Your heart and turn away—the errand's noose.

Facing

Among the first of lessons Shaykh would teach,
When we were young and had no words to say,
Was Hell is here within one's left arm's reach;
And Heaven is this garment you display.

Such lessons made us stand so firm in prayer,
Like every breath we'd end our mortal way,
Like face-to-face with God on Judgment Day,
And, awestruck, have no grudges to declare.

Standing

I sought the ecstasy of you, my love:
Your presence overwhelming, closer than
A touch.

I sought the nuances of you,
My love; the petals and the garden both;

The hour has come again to feel a loss
Of heartbeat, skeleton, and supple mind
Observing how you lived your life and prayed;
And watching thus I feel myself remade.

To follow you, I clear my conscience and
With love's resolve begin the prayer and stand.

Ruku

The angels stand arrayed in rows, and we
Can join them in this fullest joy as well;
Beyond the lightyears do they worship in
Ruku—you fleets of interstellar lights.
Around the bend that solemn, burning stars
Inspire through gravitation so immense;
We mortal ones are in a form so dense,
We bend ourselves, like them, in prayer's *ruku*.

O King, of such Dominion grandest all;
Such Majesty and Beauty so intense;
Such evanescent praise our best attempts;
The bow, from hope and fear; half stand, half fall.

Sajda

Between your eyes there is a secret of
The universe and all its mystic love;
The curving visions of your insight fade
As now there comes to you a real-life kiss.

Your nose became a highway for the angels
Assigned to mark the lover who fulfills
A recitation of *Qur'an*; the bridge
between your nose and forehead nears the ground.

The elemental paths are blurring now,
Less chance to classify the world somehow;
A face obliterated, pure of heart,
I know no more, except transcendent You.

With every prayer's *rakaat* there is a length
Your head must travel for to prostrate well;
These tender third-eye kisses may compel
A clearer vision of a lover's wealth.

Sajda

Let's take no pride in doing *sajda*, friend;
The stars and trees are much more capable;
While many lives of women start and end,
And men expend their youth in folly full,
A tree extends a *sajda* through the century,
And stars' prostrations span millennia;
Nor can we match the stars of galaxy,
In size, intensity of heat, or awe;
Nor trees' tranquility, which seasons pass;
As all they do is deepen their *sujood*;
No match are we, my friend, for such high class,
Our *sajda* pales beside such epic good.
 Yet human heads has God more greatly blest,
 Because they follow God's Beloved best.

Sajda

However come you with your body's strength,
Despite the rigours of all toil and strife,
You are the master of a world, your self—
Your little bit of Earth and Ocean with
A touch of electricity—you've made
To bow, to kneel, and prostrate, on command,
To One who's free from all material.

Who are you robbed of limbs, and tongue, and sense?
A dream persisting through the decadence.

Divest yourself from "time" and "space" since these
Both veil you from the truth of silent "e"s.

There's too much light in *sajda* to see God;
A lover paired with Love will soon feel awed.

This *sajda* means for Love I'll give my head;
The lover of Allah will not feel dead.

However you explore beyond your self,
In this vast moment, deeply intimate,
With body frame surrendered, soul alight,
You're neither master nor a slave to love.

Jalsa

The personal conclusion to your prayer
Is not to stand in awestruck stance for good;
Nor prostrate everlasting with your head;
It's that you find the middle way and sit.

So take your seat among the angels there
Who in your paradise trade blessings fair,
Before the holy presence glimpsed in ease;
A celebration of divine decrees.

Salaah

Salaah, Salaah is work and marriage vows;
Refresh your limbs for prayer, go wash them all;
Then turn your face to God, when comes the call;
Erect the spine—stand firm—obey the laws;
Committed must you be despite your flaws.

At well-known times (each day, each year) we pray:
A playful interaction with the sun,
As all the shadows grow, then merge as one;
You bend your form in prayer as shadows fray,
Your sacred vow is polished every day.

Your limbs will grow in strength when they commit:
Forgetting all that happened till that breath,
They'll love you all the same through every death.
Through grogginess and need, through wealth and wit—
Through all the change in life will meaning sit.

Conclude the prayer in peace, but we'll confess
It seems to be an anticlimax for the form
That sat us in an everlasting norm.
So clothe your will, then, in its mundane dress;
And do your life's work as God's prophets bless.

As all the Caliphs of our Prophet prayed,
So were they all in wedlock when they passed;
So follow them and wed; go break your fast;
And pray each time till in your grave you're made
To feel the breeze of Love and *du'a*'s shade.

And *Maghrib* prayer is three *rakaats*,
Unique to all the *fardh*—this three.
The colours in the sky, the end
Of business hours—(unless, say, if
One works at night!). And *'Isha*'s four,
And *Fajr*'s two. For *'Zuhr*: four;

And yes, there are the *sunnah* prayers,
Though four at 'Asr's quite enough;
Imagine all the souls throughout
The centuries that stood for prayer—
For Fajr, say. Imagine all
The times the call to prayer turned heads.
The Friends of God within the rows,
In middle rows, on Fridays. Wives
And husbands washing up to see
Another world together. On
A boat, atop a hill ... in awe.

The *Qibla* of *du'a* is all the sky;
The bedroom of your heart is formless sky;
So ask—through recitation or through sigh;
The tranquil hearts and broken hearts fly high—
Intoxicated by the “Who” and “Why”;
As marriage comes with sweetness, after prayer
The heartfelt conversation leaves you bare.

Walking

My heart is ripping through my chest, my friend,
Yes, I will come to you my love, I will;
Yes, show me stunted secrets—break the glass
I will, and see perfection crafted from
Eternity. BEFORE EACH STEP I see
The evil Hellfire God has justly made;
The brightest Flood of presence heavenwide;
The crushing moment, though, before these two
Existences is Day of Judgment, no!
I will not want a thing—forgive you all.

The Shaykh would walk like this in every step,
Aware, his sole would touch the ground and yet
Again his foot would rise and move through such
Discretion.

The beauty of this body as it walks,
The feet so blest to walk upon this Earth;
The ancient carpet: dust, and snow, and sand—
To walk upon this Earth and not to fly,
This ancient ritual of meeting, yes.

Breathing

The air has turned to water all around
AND NOW THIS MOMENT DEEPLY inhale, yes.
The Presence of a singularity
Is dawning on me; I disrobe from I—
Insanity is handshake here and hugs;
Is intimate kisses, pillowtalk jokes;
Exhaling crafts a world of logic and
The world of witnessing.

The breath-like flow,
In prayer is ecstasy timed with accounting;
In writing is the pen grip and its ink;
In conversation—comments with detachment;
In football games it's running with the passing;
In chess it's calculation / intuition.
In love it's me with you.

Sounds

The first *ijaza* I was given was
The right to remain silent. Before that
When there was only we, we said, “No doubt!
We witness,” when responding.

One day with
The Sheikh, and all of us around, we drank
Some tea and had a good discussion. I
Was sipping chai enjoying meditation.
I listened mostly, sipping chai, then heard

A big stone ship the size of Earth and Moon
Start scraping across the craggy peaks, through
Earth atmosphere, and quickly causing a
Pure deafness and stillness....

The hearing of your poetry, your song,
It's out of time or something? I attempt
To feel my way beyond, within, each note.
At times the Friday lyrics go with some
Forgotten February; Ramadan
connects with Khizr's birthday, floating free.

I hear melodies, I hear melodies;
GATHER UP YOUR SOUL AND LISTEN.

Sights

The one who knows himself will know his Lord,
True vision isn't what you see but Who;
My eye dissolved in wonder witnessing;
The one who knows himself will know his Lord.

Speech

The ancient inspiration for a heart
At peace; vibrations from a life before
This world; A knowledge of all poetry
Before a word was said.

The silence of
Beloved, sitting by the pond, content.

Work and Action

Imams who work are better than Imams
Who talk;

So said the Caliph who revived
Us. Flaming heart, the lightning feet, the arms
So restless, swirling round the gift of one
Who's most removed and at the centre too,
Known only to Beloved.

Imams who work are better than Imams
Who talk; the work is your relationship
With God. The oceanic *zikr* tip
Of gnosis cleanses every heart it calms.

Melody

A timeless tune of sober witnessing,
The mundane moments, variations, waves;
The changes men and women may observe,
A love unlimited, with oceans, shores.

Harmony

A baby crawled out on the ledge and laughed,
While all the grown-ups, when they saw her, cried;
Two avid readers of a book of craft
Discussed the writer of the book and sighed.

A group of failures saw the show and dined;
You match the colours that your love displays.
A baby peeks outside the window and
The baby on the ledge comes in and plays.

Intent, Love, and Presence

I made near ninety-thousand *tasbiyaat*
Each day until, at last, I lost my math;
In space, I froze so fully I felt hot
One overnight, and then I found the path.

How did we get here? Who can say, my friend,
This never was about good reasoning.
What do we do here? O, my friend, who knows;
But look: a banquet with great seasoning.

The appetites are lost when wonders spread,
There's only witnessing of presence, one
That makes us lose our selves—no word is said;
And then, recitals of majestic fun.

Laa elaaha illallah

O Mighty word! O blessed phrase of Truth,
Which in three letters has spilled out the worlds!
This crimson ball of fire we call a sun—
The stratospheres of Heaven—many streets,
Now ancient, that were crossed by wives of kings;
Whatever blessed phrase extends, creates,
Revives, and dominates through subtlest pull—
The evanescent scent of oranges
That peeling brings to rise; the memories
Of family; the holding hands, in love.
In *Laa elaaha illallah* we have
A sentence made of just three letters that
Creates, destroys, affirms, negates, and this
Great phrase—great word of Truth—before which worlds
Do stand in full attention, is confirmed
Again in just three letters with “I AM.”

What brings the farmer into farming, friend?
Is it his eye for crops, his strength of arm;
It's neither, nor was cash his cause to farm.
’Twas for the sweetest fruit plucked at the end.

Roots, messengers, branches

The roots of trees are hidden in the earth;
The branches, reaching out, are manifest;
Between the roots and branches, messengers
Of light are moving back and forth: the sweet
Reality of trees.

Nur and Neurons

How do the letters triply mystical
Of *Laa elaaha illallah* apply
To us—angelic and yet animal?

The Caliph hints at wisdom of the drakes;
The boy dressed in a dragon costume leaps
And says “Surprise!”, and so a birthday starts.

How do the letters triply mystical
Of *Laa elaaha illallah* apply
To this, our *dunya* that’s material?

Aware of what is going on inside,
She smiles at all the trees the brain can hide:
A neuron forestry may *worlds* confide.

Dyslexic Doubts, A New Way Out

Imagine that one's devil turns and says
To both the angels that are keeping score
"I've changed my mind! He's too much fun."—embrace
Islam he does right then on Monday night.

When Canada discovered it was war
Across the ocean there, it hired its thieves;
Conscripted murderers and psychopaths—
Intelligence is not a game for wimps!

A woman passes by, voluptuous
And friendly, so the boy's new devil-friend
Says in the whisper that's the devil's art:
This world's not real, and so there grows a doubt.

And argument with parents, siblings, friends:
*These words are simply what your neurons felt—
The words themselves you never ever heard,
Or did you?* Sons and daughters sense their truths.

A midnight scholar gets a text—"You're shit"—
Dyslexic devil-friend re-writes—"You're this"—
And so the scholar sees the "s" and "t"
Start whirling like a dervish round the "hi".

Ecstatic from dyslexic doubts, since "this"
Is what is here and now, not far away,
He starts to whirl. And vanishes! The three—
The angels and the devil-friend—then wait
For their Imam.

Lyrics for one

Remember breaking fast upon that song,
Which spoke of how your love and chocolate
Resembled one another? How the sweet
Existence, be it utmost hidden, of
Your love is Known. Perhaps you didn't know
About yourself. One does not see one's face,
Until a certain age.

Remember when,
In line to post a package, music played?
The Shaykh had taken over radio.

Remember belly dancers singing there,
In front of Fifty-Five—a house in flames—
The firemen's spotlight searching everywhere;
And one of them, the belly dancers, looked
At you and said,
“—let's go up to the roof!”

Majzub will start by saying no-one knows;
The *Salik* interrupts and says no *need*
To be alone.

Forest and Jungles

She's floating past the rows unending in
The treescape paradise; she is their breeze;
Their quiver and her fragrance conjures up
A momentary world—created, dreamt,
Returned.

A nightmare, nightmare storm at night,
And every branch and twig is shaking, rain
And thunder—breezes whipping past the pain,
Emotions burning up the forest and
Transforming trees to jungles.

O, at peace,
The breeze begins to breathe and trees return;
The chatter of the jungle critters fade;
Love's *chadr* preps a picnic in a glade.

Words and Vibrations Interstellar

Unhinged, perceived I *Andalus* as just
A single sound, as fruit is freshly plucked,
So, too, the sweetest pluck of string from some
Thin Turk guitar; perceived the cough of one,
Amid the *Hayy* of circles spinning *zīkr*,
As all creation: voiced, then heard, then passed.
Beyond, beyond, beyond: the One whose free
From all material.

The Sheikh asked *when*
Was this?

Perceived I some vibration when,
Upon a fortnight filled with deathly longing,
A kind of spirit scan: vibrations on
My right side and my brain was kissed, first right
Then left.

These dots of yours are screws that keep
The universe together—but beware of pride:
These aren't screws for some construction, some
Great building, just an instrument.

A sound
Heart.

Grand vibrations set in motion. Speech
From first eternities expands through skies.
A sound heart. Planets quiver, fade like bubbles;
Beyond two hundred thousand miles a second.
A sound heart;

It was poetry, your words;
A sound heart may perceive your poetry.

The Smile of a Woman, Curve of The Universe

O you ecstatic angel brought to Earth,
And mixed to manhood with your flimsy frame,
And clothed and housed and feasting on your worth;
You seek the full perfection of your aim:
Between imbalances of more or less,
Between slight treachery or dullest mind,
Between all rage extreme or cowardliness;
And 'tween the greedy appetites that blind
Or listless temper. What, O men, were you
Created for—what purpose does your heart
Fulfill? The best in all the cosmos, too,
You toil, and speak, and wish, but wherefore start?
 To worship God, to find a mean, observe
 A woman's smile—an arcing universe.

Smile of The *Majzub*

Like *ith'r* so absorbed in scent intense,
A fraction of a droplet will suffice.

Like trillionaires enriched by wealth immense,
A slight endorsement changes governments.

Like long-lost lovers past all common sense,
Who, separated by ten continents,
Send to each other in full confidence,
A letter to refresh their sentiments.

A *sunnah* of Beloved for *majzubs*:
To just through smile revive the universe.

Smile of The Shaykh

O, what sobriety is this, my friends:
All women happy and no man displeased;
And my apartment swept of dust and clean;
And in my blood flows love so pure, a wine
That flows in Earth, its molten lava, wine
Of gravity extending infinitely—
And wine of breathing, beer of walking, ale
Of sitting with my friend in contemplation.

The time has come: Relax or Cry—I feel
The *silsilah* is just for me today:
The *silsilah* is rain.

The Lord Forgives.

Afterword

What is the nature of this drunkenness divine?
How can the sob'rest Folk speak of a sacred wine?
It's *tawba* perpetual mixed with love, my friend,
From all that was or will be to what has no end—
A human heart that's tasting gnosis of The Lord.

Beyond the cosmos there are legends of your heart.

GLOSSARY

qibla

This term refers to the direction of the Holy City of Makkah. The Qibla will change depending on where you are in the world. For praying the five daily prayers, etc., the believer should determine where the qibla is and face in that direction.

adhaan

This refers to the call to prayer made by human voice. The call consists of ancient holy Arabic phrases alerting believers the time for ritual prayer has come and encouraging them to gain the benefits of breaking from the material world and obeying the command of The Divine.

shaykh (sheikh)

Shaykh (or Sheikh) refers to an elder, a learned man, or a spiritual guide. (Feminine

equivalent is Shaykha)

ruku

The bowing portion of the ritual prayer. Hands are generally placed on knees and the back is kept straight. Some holy phrases in Arabic are usually said silently.

rakaat

This refers to a cycle of prayer that comprises all of the forms of prayer (qiyam [standing], bowing [ruku], sajda [prostration], and jalsa [sitting]). Some rakaats do not have the sitting portion, and this usually occurs in alternation: a two rakaat prayer will see the person sitting only in the 2nd rakaat; a four rakaat prayer will see the person sitting only in rakaats 2 and four.

sajda

This term is most often translated as “prostration”. It is the part in the ritual prayer where the worshipper places his or her forehead and nose on the ground, with the palms, knees, and toes also on the

ground. With the back generally straight, this position of surrender to The Divine has special significance in religious literature. There are holy Arabic phrases that are repeated during this position.

sujood

This is the plural of sajda.

du'a

Often translated as supplication, it is that kind of worship made specifically to ask for something or to make some sort of appeal to The Divine.

maghrib

The ritual prayer after sunset.

fardh

A compulsory act of worship.

isha

The ritual prayer at night after twilight leaves the sky.

fajr

The ritual prayer between dawn and sunrise.

zuhr

The ritual prayer performed in the afternoon.

sunnah

Prophetic traditions (not compulsory, like Fardh, but full of blessings if done)

asr

The ritual prayer between early evening and sunset.

ijaza

Formal permission.

khizr

Legendary ancient spiritual teacher.

zikr

Remembrance (specifically, remembrance of The Divine).

tasbiyaat

Invocations (plural of word for invocation). Specifically the counting of holy phrases, holy names, etc., often with a rosary.

la ilaaha illallah

Arabic phrase: Nothing is worthy of worship except The Divine. (No god except

The God)

nur

Spiritual Light.

dunya

Material world.

Raa

10th letter of Arabic alphabet.

Alif, Baa

First and second letter of Arabic alphabet.

majzub

Someone drawn to God and very absorbed in feelings of The Divine.

salik

Someone who draws closer to God and is very discerning about the path.

chadr

Persian/Urdu word for sheet of cloth, which is often used to cover oneself or as a table spread.

andalus

Muslim Spain.

hayy

In the poem, this refers to a spiritual

gathering where the Divine Name “al-Hayy” (The Ever Living) was recited.

ith’r

This is my swashbuckling transliteration of what in English would be classified as myrrh. Good scent. Possibly an oil-based cologne/perfume.

silsilah

A continuity, a chain of something: a family lineage; a legal saga; a spiritual chain of master-disciple spanning centuries--this last example is what is meant in the penultimate poem of this collection.

tawba

Repentance.