

ASIF RAZA

Five Poems
(From *Splendor of Faded Colors*)

SEVEN SISTERS¹

On a coral island, wide,
Seven sisters, somnambulist,
Pursuing their nightly dream,
From their lookout, a reddish rock,
Scan the wide expanse of the sea
But only the white foam of a returning wave
Dissolving itself upon the shore.

Seven sisters, golden-haired, slender, tall,
Their virgin lips, cherry-red, aquiver
Their eyebrows arched, like daggers sharp,
Raging in their breasts an unrelenting storm,
Barred by the threshold of the sea,
They wait upon their dream.

A sail!
The glint of diamonds in their eyes!
But no! Only a cloud upon the horizon.
The watery highway desolate as ever.
A picture of despair,
They let the pearls fall from their unclenched fists
Which the liquid abyss takes back without a question.
They pick up their seven-stringed lyre of gold,

¹“Sāt Behnēn,” from the poet’s collection *Bujhē Raṅgōṅ kī Raunaq* (Karachi: Academy Bazyaft, 2008), 30–32. For the original poem, see the Urdu section elsewhere in this issue.

And sing a golden masterpiece.
Their seven-octaved voices reach the farthest shores,
The rising wind suspends its surge upon the mountaintop.
The watery bell in its cavern delays its notice of distant journeys.

Their returning song! it bears the promise of a silver-draught
In a goblet of gold,
The tidings of an eternal moment of glory
(Hiding its face, the seashell adds its offering ... a priceless
pearl).
The turbulence of waves is stilled at once,
Upon touching the coral-pink soles of their feet.

In response to a query by a passing undercurrent
The rocky ledge, shatters into fragments in hanging low its head.
An indolent vortex, to say it bears no news,
Negates itself by undoing its watery folds.
Self-wastingly, the morning squanders its gold
Upon the surface of a silent sea.

Seven sisters, their azure eyes of unfathomable depths,
In which only the phantoms seek refuge,
Silver apples of golden boughs
Pressed tightly against their heaving breasts,
Motionless, they peer beyond the gathering mists
The terror that the shores strike into the sailors' hearts!
No ship enters the bay.

A fleet of cargo-laden ships,
Sails on silently toward its destination.
Dark shapes perched up high on the masts,
Hands shading eyes to stay the charted course,
Sharp-eyed, sharp-eared,
In whispers they mention the harbor ahead,
And its promise of a restful sleep
Before another busy day.

THE SANCTUARY²

Your breast is a sanctuary in a placid garden
 Above which does not circle
 Like over its dominion,
 The shadow of a raven
 Where, weary of its fecundity
 The earth does not turn its back upon the sky
 To lie face down
 Where, when the wind blows,
 The leaves do not turn pale with fright

The verdant wood does not recall the wooden coffin
 And the youthful leafy branch
 Does not tremble
 In terror of its own denuded phantom
 Where, with motherly solicitude
 When the morning breeze rocks
 The cradle of a flower
 The morning sun of a glorious tomorrow shines bright.

Turning into the azure air
 A vortex of myriad colors commingled
 Wherein drowns the dizzy morning
 The poppy dozing off heavy with sleep
 And a slender stem
 Entwined into an embrace with a jasmine flower

Pendant on your cheek a lock of your black hair
 Which a hanging branch bedecks with a crimson flower
 How hotly burns your breast, as if a fiery dome!
 In your embrace, overpowered by sleep,
 I fall into a faint, like an infant

I catch a tune to which a star attunes its notes
 Then, tracing an incandescent furrow,
 Vanishes into the dark
 But do not be alarmed!

²“Sina Tirā,” from *ibid.*, 34–35. For the original poem, see the Urdu section elsewhere in this issue.

It's just a delirium of an old remembrance!
Deny me not the wine of oblivion
That I drink from your mouth

Like lake your eyes, color of the skies
From their depths emerge my dead desires reborn
And my heavy heart feels weightless
Like a sac emptied of poison
And every flower bud
A bubble on the turning tide of ecstasy

But wearied, when you push away my heavy head,
Then I begin to notice, surging forward,
The shadows that were banished from the garden,
At that moment, a startling thought flashes across my mind
Is your dark hair mocking me
Surreptitiously, deep down in its black heart?

THE BEAST³

The bird that used to sing to him in starry notes
Has left the august temple of the tree
The beast, upright his legs,
Shakes it frenziedly between his paws,
He bites into the fallen honeyed fruit
But groans aloud, chagrined
Since bitter now the taste.

The slender stem that used to bend to him
To suckle him on its ambrosial sap
Now stands erect, unbending and indifferent
Embodiment of hate itself!

The bower green, that used to hold out to him
A violet bunch of mellow grapes
Does not extend its soft embrace to him

³“Darinda,” from *ibid.*, 43–44. For the original poem, see the Urdu section elsewhere in this issue.

It is autumn-struck and desolate and dry.

Barren branches, bare of leaves
 Are motionless, like prison bars
 His punishment!
 Condemned to carry till eternity
 In his memory a tune divine
 He lifts his muzzle up towards the distant sky
 Howling out a doleful cry.

THE GUESTS⁴

Alas! What kind of feast is this
 To which these strangers come
 Clad in mourning attire and who,
 Despite the unpropitious midnight,
 Keep coming on their noiseless feet?

Their lofty brows bespeak
 That they are the scions of a noble lineage
 The shimmering cobwebs that festoon the aged beams
 And hang down to the earthen floor
 Part with a courtly bow to let them pass

Their memory is tether-bound to the covenant
 That held the promise of a fitting welcome
 In a marble palace of gilded dome
 Wherein they were to be treated
 To a celebratory banquet
 Instead—they are greeted
 By the ancient crumbling walls
 Are they well-acquainted with their somber faces?

Are these guests habituated to these solemn rites?
 As if propelled by a surreptitious longing
 They form a circle on the floor

⁴“Mehmān,” from *ibid.*, 69–71. For the original poem, see the Urdu section elsewhere in this issue.

Their heads hung low
And souls condemned to restlessness
Their aching foreheads cradled on their knees
But no host shows up to greet them

Nowhere the beautiful slaves of tender years
Absent the virgin slave girls bowing in salutation
No banquet cloth is spread out
With myriad foods and drinks
No hallowed grapes or blessed milk
No consecrated honey
Instead the earthen floor that offers them
Only the dust to eat

Denied the oblivion of death
These phantom shapes
Startle up when the morning cock
Crows its prayer call
They spread out their arms (like birds their wings)
To journey back to their blighted abode.

THE SEASON⁵

This is not the season when the flowers
Blossom on the branches in a bower
This is not the season when lonesome strangers
Make a vow, as they embrace each other
To undertake the long journey together
This is no season to long
For a far-off destination

This is the season when the busy farmer
Heartbroken or contented
Lifts the meager or bounteous yield
He has harvested from his field
This is no season to plough the land

⁵“Mausam,” from *ibid.*, 72–73. For the original poem, see the Urdu section elsewhere in this issue.

Or seed the soil.

Time's circle has completed its full turn
Each tree stands bearing on its back
Its bounteous burden
And every branch is busy
Reckoning its fruit
A reprobate is he who in this season
Has nothing to proclaim
Who stands alone uncounted
But for the debt he has to pay

The flowers that were destined to bloom
Have bloomed
The strangers who were meant to be together
Are already in each other's embrace
Those who set out to find a home
Or seek after some dreamt-of land
Have, if they could, already met their coveted goal.

He who is now alone, without a friend
Alas! His haste is but in vain!
Alone and friendless he shall stay
For his remaining days
He shall not ever know
The blissful joy of a restful sleep
In an accustomed place
His cold nights will never be warmed
By a beloved's embrace

He who now stoops his back
To carry his heavy pack
Is doomed to trip and fall
To knock on every latched door
That he finds on his way
But none shall offer him a place to stay
He shall be shunned by all

—*Translated by the poet*