

RIYAZ LATIF

## Eleven Poems

VENICE<sup>1</sup>

casting me in shackles of aquatic vegetation  
waters still clasp me  
my breath water  
my spirit water  
in ripple within ripple folds of my image  
a heritage of portals and windows  
has unfurled fluid rudders—  
shimmer over shimmer  
in the effervescence of my net-cast veins  
I set afloat  
lanterns of ornate-bodied boats—  
holding the mirror of skies above the head  
spiraling down from the million perplexed crimson  
eyes of pigeons  
the moss-tainted vaults and domes of  
churches, palaces and funduqs—water  
manifest on fluid expanses of my bosom  
piazza to piazza dove-wings  
countenances of civilizations  
column within column all voyager-forms of winds—  
in the streets of water  
have blended agelessly  
gold-cruised circuits of merchant vessels  
  
contained in all adornments but  
enigmatic laps of mirage-waves  
have, each moment,

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<sup>1</sup>“Vēnis,” from *She‘r-o-Hikmat 2* (July 2010), 622.

replenished my worn face  
so now recounting sagas of  
my own watery dream-eyed shadows  
perpetually perched on shoulders of flow  
what if I brewed up now a storm of transformation?  
what if I submerged in your eyes?

**EXPANSE<sup>2</sup>**

each thing as if it had grown distant to me—  
cannot recall the names of winds, of worlds,  
on the unborn axis of my meaning  
with whose eyes shall I weep my eyes?  
the loneliness of my words  
in whose lips' disavowal  
shall I bury?

**CARAVAGGIO'S ANGELS<sup>3</sup>**

when  
packing tempests of seven heavens  
in the coquetry of tiny, soft, gentle forms  
we have descended  
who has seen us fall into Time?  
all bound in the embrace of four dimensions;  
the trumpet, the fire;  
lament of our wings;  
the only ascending continuity with the derelict worlds of the  
above ...  
in the abundance of our graceful twirls  
we are curved over histories of lands, of Time  
stepping out of imagination; out of the meaning of hues;

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<sup>2</sup>“Fāṣla,” from *ibid.*, 623.

<sup>3</sup>“Kārāvājīō kē Farishtē,” unpublished. The poem attempts to engage with the lyrical spirit of the angels and cherubs so assiduously depicted in the oeuvre of the Baroque painter Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610).

in this arrested air  
we herald arid messages voicing arrival of gods  
we have come  
squandering empires of grass and dew;  
in our embrace  
we have  
brought itinerant skies of the eternal darkness of the heart

**SOAP<sup>4</sup>**

in peregrinations of two worlds  
aroma aroma  
my lips have passed through radiant breasts,  
through abodes of dense nights beneath the navel—  
I too am known  
to the blind splendor of wet skin,  
chafing incessantly against stormy nooks and twists of bodies  
each moment I too have relinquished life,  
turning my existence to foam  
I rinse dreams of clay  
in the spheres of your nuclei  
I plant a crystal firmament  
in the eyes of tempestuous pores  
I forfeit my face

**IN MEMORY OF FUTURE<sup>5</sup>**

the eye of my past, future  
and this, my evidence:  
the droplet which was an ocean once  
these winds that were once breaths  
and the solitude of this tree  
which someday shall soak in the waters of my voice

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<sup>4</sup>“Şābun,” unpublished.

<sup>5</sup>“Mustaqbil ki Yād Mēñ,” unpublished.

the eye of my past, future  
and this, my evidence:  
roving through unborn Time  
I shall slumber in its history  
if I was, then I shall be

**POEM<sup>6</sup>**

in poetry's dark nights  
from the whispers of two hands  
from the misty frontier of lips  
from the covert songs of faces  
from the vanished empires of feet  
from the spread arms of cells  
an ocean has raged down—

**SPARROW'S GRAVE IN LANE NUMBER THREE<sup>7</sup>**

if you ever go  
tread gently—  
in lane number three  
is the grave of a tiny sparrow  
in whose wings we  
have interred the flights of our childhood  
the earth of the grave is moist still  
in which rests us boys' world of errant fantasy—

in the winding coiling breaths of lane number three  
were shrouded so many Shabbirs!  
one Shabbir "Damo"  
one Shabbir "Pao"  
one Shabbir "Pappi"

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<sup>6</sup>"Nazm," unpublished.

<sup>7</sup>"Tīn Nambar kī Galī Mēñ Čiryā kī Qabr," from *She'r-o-Hikmat* 2 (July 2010), 624.

and one Shabbir “Mee”  
 Aliya Badru where are they now?  
 each one now vanished  
 in true or counterfeit graves  
 and on the nook of lane number three  
 in the eyes of desolate winds  
 wander long-vanished faces  
 in whose circle within circle encompassment  
 the flapping of the sparrow’s wings  
 comes afar to meet me  
 outside its grave—

**HIS BANTER<sup>8</sup>**

at the outset I had said as you squeeze forever the hues of the  
 Almighty’s eyes in identical manner voice from our caverns  
 barren hushed butterfly of trees in wild passion of deserts  
 planets each gorgeous and beautiful in its dust homeless we  
 had been there we too had been summoned how delectable he  
 has prepared the biryani today what is it to Man he will come  
 along for the appeasement of his sulking belly in the palm of  
 winds horizons my lord I wander having snapped water flow’s  
 every stranger branch one instant this our existence our ecstasy  
 so bazaars peppers wilderness are seen in flight asleep in the  
 spiraling of stars conspiracies’ ring-masters’ scimitars and  
 shields are a sham and I am stressing that biryani dal and rice  
 we carried on devouring the colorfulness of the grave and the  
 arms too are beginning to ache on each secret’s withered  
 forehead for at the outset I had said river ocean tree in the very  
 same garments a million births salutations there is such  
 munificence from my lord everything else here is a mirage...

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<sup>8</sup>“Us kī Bātēñ,” unpublished. This “poem” is in memory of a person I used to frequently encounter in the streets where I grew up. To everyone in the neighborhood, he was deranged; he had very substantially lost his mental equilibrium. Nevertheless, the echo of his incoherent cryptic discourse has always remained with me. To that end, this “poem,” while trying to acknowledge the man’s interior world, is an almost unsuccessful attempt to replicate something akin to his utterances, to don his speech in imperfect imitative attire.

**ABSTRACTIONS—1**<sup>9</sup>

the heritage of tears  
fluid earth  
turns silently  
in the bosom a wheel of hushed winds  
again leaves sprouted on voices  
turned hands, fate, palm, woods  
forging rivers sands  
on the finger died all civilizations

**ABSTRACTIONS—2**<sup>10</sup>

from fugitive shadows  
leaf leaf  
thought-branches  
drip  
from the eyes of winds  
images from which  
I smell the stench  
of deceased mirrors

**EXONERATION**<sup>11</sup>

forgive me  
grief-seared faces of air!  
for I have not yet uncovered  
the rim of your sky-within-sky visages—  
forgive me  
silhouettes of stars!  
for as yet I have remained inadequate  
in inhabiting the decrepit atoms of your darkness—  
I have flowed solitary from the eyes of absence—

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<sup>9</sup>“Tajridēñ—1,” from *Sheʿr-o-Ḥikmat* 2 (July 2010), 625.

<sup>10</sup>“Tajridēñ—2,” unpublished.

<sup>11</sup>“Maʿzirat,” unpublished.

forgive me  
love-harboring mirages!  
for I have come to reside in your arms  
resembling desolate voices of oceans  
who does my silence seek?  
forgive me  
for as yet I have not been able to know that—  
forgive me  
all things clasped in the shackles of eternity!  
for I have been sowed  
as if thirst in the droplet of Time  
have been wept from the eyes of eons—  
I am the vista of the moment of the beyond  
I am a contemporary of butterflies' wings, of winds, of God!

—*Translated by the poet*