

Selected poems by al-Shushtari

1. *You are ultimate joy*

This is the one we love – he loves me through choice.

From all eternity he loved my essence – in his house I dwell¹.

There is nothing that can make me leave him, there being no house for another.

Everything is manifest to me from him, be it so-called evil or good,

All things come to me from him, whether in the mosque or in the monastery.

I am one, never two – yet in this matter in perplexity:

from a stone water springs out before you, while within a rock the water is fire.

I am one, he is one – how can we ever be two?

He is the adored, I the adorer – from that come two opposites.

He is the contemplated, I the contemplator – which of us is bringing twoness?

When we two are one, it's a union that makes non-compatibility disappear,

we are hidden in this world and the next, in a place of rank and repose.

Beware of seeking something outside – you won't find a thing elsewhere existing.

Not an atom can leave you – all things are within you existing.

You are ultimate joy: you the examiner separating good from bad, I the one being tested

Being is one: all of it is through you and in you manifesting its effects.

The gold of your essence is multileaved – within your interior lies the standard of purity.

You confined one², pay attention to your spirit – you are, there is no-one other than you.

You are he, the reality, whether still or in movement.

You are your own secret and your own public – there is no good but your own goodness.

Through you are manifest all these unlimitable things:

to you they will return when ordered, just as they have appeared for your sake.

The *alif* is one, totally, and the letters manifest from it –

leave behind *bā'* and *tā'* when they emerge from the essence of the *alif*³;

do the same with *lām* and *yā'* when they pour forth from her Being.

¹ Or: "I am still, motionless" (*sākin*).

² A possible reference to Q.17:20: "Your Lord's giving is never confined".

³ The Arabic alphabet begins with *alif*, *bā'* and *tā'* and ends with *yā'*. At the same time there may be an allusion to the word *batta* (= *bā'* + *tā'*), meaning 'to be complete or decided', and in the next verse to the idea of *lī* (= *lām* + *yā'*), meaning 'belonging to me'.

For you are that *alif* – the letters are collected together within your being.
All the universes are within you, after having burst forth and drained away.⁴

2. *Poverty and riches*

We come to you in poverty, not riches,
for you are the generous one.
You accustomed us to every grace, may
your grace endure.
These poor dishevelled souls of yours are drenched
in your love, because it is the utmost of desires.
There is no one in richness like you
and in poverty there are none like us.
We see you manifest in everything;
nothing is ours.
I hid your name out of jealousy. Look at me,
lost on a mountain trail and a slope.
Since you are always with me,
I have no need to carry provisions: I am rich.
For you, you are the truth, there is no other
and I – would that I knew – who am I?⁵

3. *My art*

Tell the *faqih* on my behalf:
loving the beautiful one⁶ is my art.

My drink, with him from the glass,
and the *hadra*⁷, with those gathered round
close by, good companions
they lifted the weight from me.

⁴ From al-Shushtarī's *Dīwān*, no 35, trans. SH.

⁵ Alvarez, p. 69. A monorhyme *qaṣīda*, attributed to al-Shustarī, *Dīwān*, no 23.

⁶ Literally, 'the possessor of beauty' (*dhū al-malīh*), while clearly a reference to God also gestures towards a rich tradition of profane poetry.

⁷ Literally, 'presence', it is used by mystics to mean 'being in the presence of God'. It also refers to ecstatic mystical gatherings.

Tell the *faqih* on my behalf:
loving the beautiful one is my art.

What kind of believer do you take me for?
The law⁸ revivifies me
and the truth annihilates me.
Know that I am a Sunni⁹.

Tell the *faqih* on my behalf:
loving the beautiful one is my art.

And know there is no one home
except you, so let's get to the point.
Enter into the arena with me.
Have faith. Don't push me away.

Tell the *faqih* on my behalf:
loving the beautiful one is my art.

If you could see me at home
when I raise the curtains
and my love is naked with me...
in union with him I am made glad.

Tell the *faqih* on my behalf:
loving the beautiful one is my art.

So leave me be and spare me your delusions,
for you lust for yourself
and this world is your boudoir.
Wake up, you will see my beauty.

Tell the *faqih* on my behalf:
loving the beautiful one is my art.¹⁰

⁸ *sharī'a*, generally referring to the rules and codes of law governing Muslim life, derived from the Qur'an and hadith. The study of *sharī'a* is called *fiqh*, whence the term *faqīh*, 'jurist'.

⁹ i.e. one who follows the practice (*sunna*) of the Prophet.

¹⁰ Alvarez, p. 42. *Dīwān*, no 84.

4. Don't say He forgot you

Gaze in your mirror.

Gaze in your mirror.

The one you see there,
that is you.

Raise the mirror and look.

Everything appears there.

You will see open space and dense civilisation,
death and life.

What is veiled only appears
to you through the mirror.

Your cloak is removed.

Your cloak is removed.

You will endure in oneness
and see nothing but yourself.

Don't seek the blemishes of others
for you too have blemishes.

Every blemish is yours –
turn away and repent.

If your heart were to open,
the veils would be lifted.

You would see this and that

You would see this and that

You would delight in the knowledge of the unseen
and thank the one who gives.

All words are yours
and speech.

Take revelation from beauty
and cast ugliness aside.

Tell the ignorant:
in your ignorance you are blinded.

Had he wished to guide you

Had he wished to guide you

You would have carried out his orders

and avoided what was prohibited.

Know, o humble servant of God,
the truth of this knowledge.

Knowing that God
loves the pure,
hope only in God,
be satisfied in Him.

Don't say He forgot you.
Don't say He forgot you.
In what is hidden and what is visible,
He always sees you.¹¹

5. *The night's journey*

You who look in the mirror.
Do you see whom you see there?
Is the looker someone other than you,
or a reflection of your fantasy?
Turn your glance toward the glance itself,
for it holds wisdom concealed from the others.
When day breaks, may people
praise the night's journey.¹²

¹¹ Alvarez, p. 93 (adapted trans). *Muwashshaḥ* mostly in classical Arabic, *Dīwān*, no 54

¹² Alvarez, p. 105. A monorhyme *qaṣīda*, *Dīwān*, no 18. The final line paraphrases an Arabic proverb '*inda al-ṣabāḥ yaḥmadu al-qawm al-surā*' ('at daybreak, the party commend night-journeying'), directed at someone who is going through difficulties, urging patience. For mystics, the night-journey (*surā* or *isrā*) refers both to Muhammad's night journey from Mecca to Jerusalem at the beginning of his ascension (*mi'rāj*) and, by extension, to the spiritual journey undertaken by every seeker.

6. *The taste of unity*

It [Reason] made al-Hallāj enjoy the taste of unity,
so he cried out: ‘I am the one uncircumscribed by meaning’
He was told to retract what he had said, and he said: ‘No. I
drank the wine that makes all those who taste it sing’.¹³

7. *Little shaykh from Meknes*

Little shaykh from Meknes
wanders the souk and sings:
What care have I for others?
What care have they for me?
What care have I, my friend,
for the rest of creation?
Do what’s good and you’ll be saved,
follow the people of truth.
My son, hold your tongue
or be sincere.
Mark my words on a sheet of paper,
write them like an amulet.
What care have I for others?
What care have they for me?
What’s been said is clear
it needs no explanation.
What need has anyone of anyone?
Understand this advice.
Look how I’m on in years,
my walking stick and my sack.
That’s how I lived in Fez,
lowliness my comfort.
What care have I for others?
What care have they for me?

¹³ Alvarez, p. 133. An extract from a long poem in nūn.

What beautiful words
as he wanders through the souks.
You see the merchants
turn towards him,
a bag around his neck,
with walking stick and palm basket.
The little shaykh stands on solid ground
upstanding as God wills.
What care have I for others?
What care have they for me?
If you could see that little shaykh,
how fine his message!
He turned to me and said:
I see you're following me.
I put out my basket
may the one who has mercy on me, bless it.
And he puts it out
says: leave me be, leave me be.
What care have I for others?
What care have they for me?
'My son, those who do good
reap only what's good,
they contemplate their failings
and denounce their shameful deeds.
Whoever is like me
will remain an outsider.'
Those whose spirit is sweet
can forgive the singer:
What care have I for others?
What care have they for me?¹⁴

¹⁴ Alvarez, p. 74. *Zajal* with dialectal features, *Dīwān*, no 83.