

Mystical Poetry 4: Sa‘dī Shīrāzī

1) From the *Gulistān*, Anecdote 10.

An Arab king who was notorious for his cruelty came on a pilgrimage to the cathedral mosque of Damascus, where he offered the following prayer, clearly seeking God’s assistance in a matter of some urgency:

*“The dervish, poor, owning nothing,
the man whose money buys him anything he wants,
here, on this floor, enslaved, we are equals.
Nonetheless, the man who has the most
comes before You bearing the greater need.”*

When the king was done praying, he noticed me immersed in my own prayers at the head of the prophet Yahia’s tomb. The monarch turned to me, “I know that God favors you dervishes because you are passionate in your worship and honest in the way you live your lives. I fear a powerful enemy, but if you add your prayers to mine, I am sure that God will protect me for your sake.”

“Have mercy on the weak among your own people,” I replied, “and no one will be able to defeat you.”

*To break each of a poor man’s ten fingers
just because you have the strength offends God.
Show compassion to those who fall before you,
and others will extend their hands when you are down.*

*The man who plants bad seed hallucinates
if he expects sweet fruit at harvest time.
Take the cotton from your ears!
Give your people justice before justice finds you.*

*All men and women are to each other
the limbs of a single body,
each of us drawn from life’s shimmering essence, God’s perfect pearl;
and when this life we share wounds one of us,
all share the hurt as if it were our own.
You, who will not feel another’s pain,
you forfeit the right to be called human.*

Translated by Richard Jeffrey Newman

2) Ghazal: While taking my last breath...

While taking my last breath, I will be longing for you
 Hoping to turn into the dust of becoming one with you.
On the Day of Resurrection when my eyes open
 It is for you that I will be looking, to you I will be talking.
There will be gathered the beauties of both worlds
 But, being a slave to your face, I will be looking at you.
If I were to sleep for a thousand years in the realm of nothingness
 I would be awakened by mere fragrance of your hair.
I will not speak of Eden or smell the paradise rose,
 Or pursue the *houris*; it is to you that I will run without pause.
I will not drink Heaven's wine, ruby bright
 I will not need it, being drunk by your sight.

Rough translation put together by Jane Clark and friends from various sources.

3) Death Alone Puts Out The Fire

I recall a night when my eyes just wouldn't close,
and I heard a moth saying to the candle,
 "It's right for me to burn: I am the lover;
but tell me, why are you weeping and burning?"
The candle replied, "My friend, you silly thing,
Don't be naïve: I've lost my sweet companion,
honey, and since Shirin abandoned me,
like Farhad, grief's flames scorch me head to foot."¹
As the candle spoke, her pain ran in rivers down
her yellow cheeks, "You are a fraud;
you have no business loving. You lack courage;
you can't stay still; you fly from a single flame,
half-baked, while I remain till all of me
is properly done. Love's blaze may have singed

¹ The reference to honey comes from the fact that the candle is made of beeswax. There is also a pun here: Shirin means sweet and is also the name of a heroine in one of the old Persian stories. When he loses her, Farhad is so overcome with grief, he jumps to his death from a high place.

your wings, but look at me, from top to bottom
I am burning.” The candle debated like this
while the men gathered around it, and when the night
was only partly gone, one among them,
with a *pari*’s face,² put the candle to death.
Then it said, smoke swirling at its head,
“Love, my boy, ends just like that. You’ll learn,
if you’re a lover, that death alone puts out
the fire.”

Don’t shed tears at the grave of someone
thus murdered by a friend; rejoice instead
that the friend accepted him. If you’re infected,
don’t cleanse your mind of love’s sickness. Rather,
like Saadi, cleanse yourself of all
other purpose. A true lover will fight
a storm of stones and arrows to reach his goal.
Beware! Don’t try to sail that sea! You’re warned!
But if you go, give yourself to the storm.

From Selections from Saadi’s Bustan, translated by Richard Jeffrey Newman,
based on G M Wickens 1974 translation.
Global Scholarly Publications, New York, 2006. pp. 127-8

4) And Heaven Let The Oyster Do Its Work

God, who is pure, created you from dust;
like dust, therefore, practice humility.
Don’t be greedy; do not consume the world;
and even if you’re most unsatisfied,
don’t lose control. You’re made from dust, not fire.
When fire lifted its head in arrogance,
dust threw itself, helpless, to the ground,
and since one was arrogant and the other humble,
the former was made into demons; the latter, humans.

A drop of rain fell slowly from a cloud.
Shamed by the sea’s apparent endlessness

² The *pari* in Persian mythology are fallen angels who are denied heaven until they have done penance. They are exquisite, winged, [fairy](#)-like creatures ranking between angels and evil spirits.

it said, "Where there's an ocean, who am I?
If such vast water exists, I do not!"
But while it held itself in such contempt,
an oyster took it in and cherished it,
and heaven let the oyster do its work
until the drop became a kingly pearl.
It rose so high because it first bowed low,
banging at non-being's door
until at last it came to be.

Bustān translated by Richard Jeffrey Newman. P. 131

5) Don't Knot The Rope Of Generosity

I've heard that once a week went by
when no one wandering the world
stopped at the tents of Allah's Friend,³
whose practice was to eat his meals
only at the proper time
unless a poor or homeless person
came to his door. So he stood outside
his tent and looked around. At the edge
of the valley he saw a man whose hair
age had powdered white, sitting
bent and lonely in the desert like a willow. Abraham
called out his warmest welcome, "Light
of my eyes! Please, honor the salt
and bread of my table! Eat with us!"⁴
Recognizing Abraham for who he was,
the old man sprang to his feet,
eager to accept the invitation.
Abraham's attendants gave
the lowly guest a seat of honor,
called for the table to be set,
and took their own seats; but when
they said together "In God's Name..."
no words escaped the old man's mouth.

³ "Allah's friend" is a term used to refer to Abraham.

⁴ To eat salt with someone is to establish a bond with that person that should not be betrayed. Even a thief was not supposed to steal from someone with whom he had eaten salt.

Abraham spoke, "I do not see in you
the passion and sincerity of faith
that men of your age usually express.
Aren't we obliged each time we eat
to thank the One who filled our plates?"
The old man answered, "I will not speak
of God except as I have learned to do
from my teachers. I am Zoroastrian."

Once God's favored messenger found out
the destitute old man was just a *gabr*,⁵
he chased him like a stray dog from the tent.
(The pure of heart cannot abide such filth!)
But then, from Heaven, the voice of God's reproof
came down, "Dear Friend! I have fed this man,
and given him his life these hundred years,
but you, in a single moment, were filled with hate.
Why refuse him hospitality
just because he bows before a fire?"
Don't knot the rope of generosity
just because you find, in this one, fraud
and deceit; in that one, trickery and cunning."

Bustān translated by Richard Jeffrey Newman. pp. 75-76

6) Come Back Empty

There was a man who dabbled in the stars,
who, drunk with his own arrogance, empty
in his heart of all devotion, deluded,
came from far away to visit Kushyar.
Kushyar was wise and sewed his eyes up tight
against the visitor, refusing to teach
a single syllable. As the dabbler turned
to start his disappointed journey home,
Kushyar stood to his full height and said,
"No doubt you thought yourself already filled

⁵ The word *gabr* refers to Zoroastrian, but is used in a derogatory sense, meaning something akin to heathen.

with wisdom, but once a vessel is full, what more
can it hold? Filled with pretensions, you leave here
empty.

Come back empty and fill yourself with ideas!”
Do like Saadi, roam the world empty
of your own existence. You will return with knowledge.

Bustān translated by Richard Jeffrey Newman. pp. 156

7) The One Who Plants The Seeds Will Harvest

How can I tell you what went through my mind
when my child died in the town of Sana? (A sapling
takes thirty years to become a tree,
yet one rough wind can pull it up by the roots.
No wonder roses bloom upon the earth,
when so many who are roses
in our memories sleep within it.) “Die
you shameful man!” I told myself. “The child
leaves pure, while the old, like you, die stained!”
In a black passion, desperate to see my child’s
body again, I threw his headstone down
and stood in that narrow, lightless place, terrified,
turning white. When I returned to my senses,
my darling child’s voice filled my ears,
“If panic overcomes you in the dark,
use common sense. Go there with a light!”

If you want the grave to shine as bright as day,
let the light of what you do from now on
shine forth from here. The farmer trembles
as if with fever, worrying that the dates
his tree gives will not be fresh and moist,
and yet there are those, greedy for all they can get,
who think they’ll harvest wheat they haven’t sown.

The one who plants the roots, Saadi, will eat the fruit.
The one who plants the seed *will* harvest.

Bustān translated by Richard Jeffrey Newman. pp. 292-3