The Wine Ode

In memory of the beloved
we drank wine;
we were drunk with it
before the creation of the vine.

The full moon its glass, the wine
a sun circled by a crescent;
when it is mixed
how many stars appear!

If not for its bouquet
I would not have found its tavern;
if not for its flashing gleam,
how could imagination picture it.

Time preserved nothing of it
save one last breath,
concealed like a secret
in the breasts of wise men.

But if it is recalled among the tribe
the worthy ones
are drunk by morn
without shame or sin.

From the depths of the jars
it arose, though truly
nothing remained
save a name.

Yet if one day
it crosses a man’s mind
then joy will dwell in him,
and anxiety depart.

Could the tavern mates see
the seal of its jar,
without the wine that seal alone
would make them drunk,

And could they sprinkle it
on a dead man’s earth,
the spirit would return to him,
his body revived.
Could they fling
into the shadow of its trellised vine
a sick man on the point of death,
disease would flee him;

Could they bring a cripple
near its tavern, he would walk,
and from the mention of its flavour,
the dumb would talk.

Could the breaths of its bouquet
spread out in the east,
one stuffed-up in the west
would smell again;

And were a touching palm
tinged by its cup,
one would not stray at night,
a star in hand.

Could it be unveiled in secret
to the blind, he would see,
and from the strainer’s sound,
the deaf would hear.

Were the riders
to seek its soil
with one scorpion-stung among them,
the poison would not harm him.

Could the wizard write
the letters of its name
on the brow of one struck by the jinn,
the tracings would cure and cleanse him.

And were its name inscribed
upon the army’s standard,
all beneath that banner
would fall drunk from the sign.

It refines the morals
of the tavern mates
and guides the irresolute
to resolution’s path;

He whose hand never knew munificence
is generous,
while one lacking in forbearance
bears the rage of anger,
And could the stupid one among the folk
win a kiss from its strainer,
he would sense the hidden sense
of its fine qualities.

They say to me: “Do describe it,
for you know its character well!”
Indeed, I have a word
of its attributes.

Purity, not water,
subtlety, not air,
light but not fire,
spirit without the body.

Lovely features guiding
those describing it with praise;
how fine their prose and poetry
on wine.

One who never knew it
is moved by its memory,
just as one longing for Nu’m
is stirred when she is recalled.

But they say: “You’ve drunk sin!”
No, indeed, I drank only
that whose abstention
is sin to me.

So cheers to the monastery folk!
How often they were drunk with it
though they never drank it
but only longed to.

While it made me drunk
before my birth,
abiding always with me
though my bones be worn away.

So take it straight,
though if you must, then mix it,
but your turning away
from the beloved’s mouth is wrong.

Watch for it in the tavern,
try to uncover it there,
amid the melodious tunes
where it becomes the prize.
It never dwells with anxiety
at any time or place,
just as sorrow
never lives with song.

Be drunk from it,
if only for the life an hour,
and you will see time a willing slave
under your command.

For there is no life in this world
for one who lives here sober;
who does not die drunk from it,
prudence has passed him by.

So let him weep for himself,
one who has wasted his life
never having won a share
or a measure of this wine.