

Poetry from Pakistan

Daud Kamal

A Selection of Verse



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The Jubilee Series



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50 Years of Pakistan

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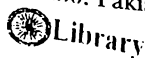
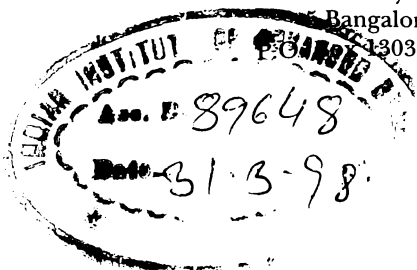
Some of these poems have first appeared in *Recognitions* (1979), *The Blue Wind* (1984), and *A Remote Beginning*, (1985), all edited by Peter Dent (Interim Press, Budleigh Salterton, Devon). Acknowledgements are also due to the Daud Kamal Trust. Several of the unpublished poems are from the personal collection of Salman Tarik Kureshi.

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A SELECTION OF VERSE

DAUD KAMAL

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INTRODUCTION

Tariq Rahman

Daud Kamal (1935-1987) wrote thus about death,

We all die
even those
who've not yet lived.
Two streams, distrustful
of each other, meet.
Night opening her mouth
to take the bite. (*Confluence*)

And night took its bite in the winter of 1987 when he was in America giving readings of his poetry. He was in his prime both as a man and a poet. His first collection of poems, *The Compass of Love*, appeared in 1973 and he was included in some of the best anthologies of Pakistani poetry in English soon after that.¹ After *Recognitions* (1979) and *A Remote Beginning* (1985) he was established in the world of letters in Pakistan and his work had

1 His work appears in the following anthologies:

Three Voices (Poems), ed., Ikram Azam, (Daud Kamal, Hamid Kamal and Ikram Azam), Nairang-e-Khayal Publications, Rawalpindi, 1985; *The Blue Wind*, ed., Peter Dent, Interim Press, Budleigh Salterton, Devon 1984; and *Journal of the English Literary Club (JELC)*, ed., Mujib Rahman, Department of English, University of Peshawar, 1988, is dedicated to the memory of Daud Kamal. Single poems are scattered in many other publications.

started getting appreciated abroad.² It was then that death claimed him for its own. In his own words:

Those who have gone
never return.
The sun drags his feet
and a tethered horse
whisks the flies
off his back
with his tail.
Water does not tell tales:
it reflects only
what it sees. (*Outsideness*)

But the critic, unlike water, cannot reflect what he sees without also telling tales. The 'tales', to explain the metaphor, are the skills and values one brings to criticism. Since both may be faulty, there is always room for other approaches, other points of view, other critical perspectives. This, therefore, is not a final judgement nor, indeed, should there ever be one which claims to be that.

Daud Kamal's style can best be appreciated if one approaches it with the imagist poetry of Hilda Doolittle and other imagists in mind. The images are like pictures drawn with precise words in a style which combines economy with clarity.

A child plays with a broken toy.
His widowed mother
washes someone else's clothes... (*Shadow Birds*)

or,

Almond blossoms
fall
and a crow—

² He was a Rockefeller Foundation resident at Bellagio (Italy) in the summer of 1987. After his death he was awarded the Faiz Ahmad Faiz Award in 1987 and the Presidential Award of Performance in 1990.

carved out of ebony—
pushes itself through the rain.
I sit scraping
the rust off my ancient coins. (*Reproductions*)

The images are not necessarily linked to each other in a narrative or logical sequence. The syntax deviates from that of prose cutting out linking words. Yet, when the poem is read as a whole it conveys meaning and each image takes on a symbolic significance as a unit of meaning in a pattern of discourse which is quintessentially poetic. This is illustrated by the following examples:

How does one forgive
the treachery
of blind rivers
and water-bullaloes
dissolving in the mud?
...
...
At the army relief-camp,
the bride-to-be
covers her head
while her parents
look the other way. (*Floods*)

In this poem the image of the water-buffaloes caught helplessly in the muddy water is the key for the parallel situation of human beings in the second stanza.

Here is another poem in which several images contribute to the meaning:

Latticed windows
and a winter sunset
trapped in narrow lanes.
Rain-puddles, unspent lives.
Don't wait—
what you are waiting for
will never come.

A young woman walks past—
blue shawl, gold bracelets,
eyes brighter than the pulsing stars.
I draw the wavering circle
of memory around her face,
but each departure's final
and solitude a perpetual stream.

Time now to measure your losses—
all those bridges
that went up in flames.
This is ice, black ice—
it will not melt.
Nor will the night
erase itself for you. (*Endurance*)

Such a poem is an organic whole. It has a rich and complex significance when it is read as such though the spatial arrangement of stanzas may suggest otherwise. Thus, while the stanzas can be understood separately they contribute to the theme together. The theme is that emotional life is stunted in poor localities which confine one in the squalor of a ghetto. This is conveyed by a number of images: latticed window; a winter sunset; narrow lanes; rain-puddles; burning bridges; and black ice which never melts. All these images convey one impression—that of being trapped, of loss, of dreariness, of defeat. The only image which does not fit in is of the young woman who walks past with 'eyes brighter than the pulsing stars'. But she is departing and the poet remembers her, or someone like her, in his permanent state of solitude. Her very vivaciousness and colour highlights the absence of these qualities in the life of the poet. And in the end the poet says 'Nor will the night/ erase itself for you' just as the ice 'will not melt'. The overall impression of deep despair is conveyed with great power by these laconic lines because of the semantic power of the images which come together now in their full meaning.

Such a style makes for brevity which can sometimes be construed as terseness. Daud Kamal's major themes are nostalgia and a sense of loss. These are archetypal romantic themes and it is difficult to use them with success simply because they have been used so often that they are greatly in danger of appearing hackneyed. Indeed, these are the themes of the *ghazal* which Daud Kamal enjoyed very much. He translated the *ghazals* of Ghalib and the poems of Faiz which use the diction and the symbolism of the *ghazal* for other purposes. This is what he said about the *ghazal*:

...I do belong to this culture...the Urdu culture...the culture of cultivated Muslims in the subcontinent. I may not be deeply versed in Urdu poetry, but I have inherited a love for the classics: Mir, Ghalib, Dard, Zafar, etc.,...I can't disown the tradition. My feelings are deeply rooted in this culture, but of course, I write in English.³

Like the *ghazal* poets, Daud too enjoys the voluptuousness of tender emotions, the soft melancholy of regret and the subtle pleasure of nostalgia. But he writes in the modern idiom and uses none of the clichéd jargon which lesser poets find so inevitable. Indeed, he uses imagery with a comment or two hinting at his emotional response. One of the best poems of this kind is as follows:

That was
another pain—
silhouettes in water.
I have answered
my inquisitors.
Virgin forest
of what could have been.

Moonburst
on thighs of snow—

3 Tariq Rahman, 'Interview with Daud Kamal', *The Nation*, 19 June 1987, p. iv.

months and years.
I have paid
the toll. (*Night-Bridge*)

There is no verbal description of the poet's regret at having loved and lost. The pain is movingly conveyed through the laconic comments: 'I have answered/my inquisitors' and 'months and years/I have paid/the toll'. The real force comes from the evocative images—one of 'moonburst/on thighs of snow' and the other of 'virgin forest' and 'silhouettes in water'. The first two images are erotic. And we find that they are dreams. They are like 'silhouettes in water'. The pleasures of love are illusory. Such a powerful poem on the loss of love could hardly have been produced through the use of narrative alone in English. The words used to describe intense feelings would appear so clichéd that the poem would be a ghost of the *ghazal* and the English Romantic poems. Daud Kamal has saved the poem from that fate by using moving imagery.

But, just as the *ghazal* used the symbolism of mysticism which gave it another dimension—that of the unknowable—Daud Kamal's poems too have another dimension. In a revealing passage he explains this as follows: 'For me, a poem is a subterranean creature; it has a pre-existence at the subconscious (or is it the unconscious?) level. The agony is in extracting it from those depths and in giving it a shape.'⁴

The other dimension, then, is about the unknowable. It is elusive and one can only hint at its presence. One might describe it in terms of Daud's effort to apprehend reality in an extra-rational way. It is expressed, as mentioned earlier, in terms of images and symbols. And, at its best, it is evocative of that sense of mystery which is part of the poetic experience. In a critic's words: 'He

4 Saleem ur Rahman, 'An Interview with Daud Kamal', *The Pakistan Times*, 6 September 1985.

comes nearest to creating that secret language of the soul we find in the works of the Arabs, which speaks through the things it names rather than the mimicry of the ratiocinative process.’⁵

But thinking in symbols has its hazards—the greatest being obscurity. According to one critic: ‘Indeed, it would appear that most of the outstanding poems are those that depend less on intensity of imagery and more on having something significant to express’.⁶

But Daud Kamal probably has something significant to express even in poems which fail to be intelligible. Upon closer inspection one invariably finds that the least intelligible poems are those where the symbols are not connected even by those few laconic hints of narrative comment which serve as bridges between images and symbols in the best poems. In other words, the very qualities of brevity and reliance upon imagery and symbolism which creates the magic of Daud Kamal’s best poems, also results in obscurity in some of his least successful products. Luckily, however, the number of good poems far exceeds the number of obscure ones.

The following collection of forty-nine poems shows Daud Kamal at his best. It contains a number of his most successful poems from his previous collections. However, the most welcome thing about it is that it also contains unpublished poems which have been retrieved from a number of collections. It does not, however, contain his translations of Urdu poems. Most of these translations are recreations. They add to the original or subtract from it but they generally deviate from it, thus creating a work of art of another kind.

Daud Kamal is no more, but the words he has left behind have assured him a permanent niche among

5 ‘*The Blue Wind: A Review*’, *Iron*, 46, 1985, p. 69.

6 Raymond Tong, ‘Daud Kamal: *A Remote Beginning: Poems*’, *British Book News*, April 1986, p. 246.

Pakistani English-language poets. I can do no better than to end on one of his own poems on death:

Poppy flower
all its four sides slit—
white blood
blackening in the sun.

Death is not
the perfection of sleep—
it is a bare mountain
without any rock-shelters.

You pluck out your grey hair
in front of the mirror—
I see dark clouds
and silently pray for rain. (*A July Afternoon*)

Can one pray, silently or otherwise, for this type of poetry to live on in a world which is becoming increasingly hostile to tenderness?

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REPRODUCTIONS

*R*eproductions
of Mogul miniatures
cut out
from last year's calendar
and fragments
of Gandhara sculpture
bought for a song.

Prince Siddhartha
gone into the night
with Channa,
his charioteer,
and old Tajiks
in their tents
drinking China tea.

Almond-blossoms
fall
and a crow—
carved out of ebony—
pushes itself through the rain.
I sit scraping
the rust off my ancient coins.

NIGHT-BRIDGE

That was
another pain—
silhouettes in water.
I have answered
my inquisitors.

Virgin forest
of what could have been.

Moonburst
on thighs of snow—
months and years.
I have paid
the toll.

BUT THE LINES REMAIN

Nothing really ever changes—
least of all
the unswept attics
of the mind.

A young
mountain woman
gathers dry twigs
against the coming storm.

One scorpion for each eyelid—
a layer of dust
under the tongue.
Stay away from the window.

I draw
the back of my hand
across my forehead—
but the lines remain.

CACTUS-MILK

*H*e looks out
of the window
at the falling snow
and murmurs to himself:
just like Siberia.

But he has never
been there—
he has never been anywhere...much.
Flakes of forgetfulness—
a flotilla of dead leaves.

Inside his head
a chaotic cinema-film—
overexposed pictures
and an inaudible soundtrack.

And on the worn-out carpet
a giant horseshoe of light.
Life was beautiful
once. Outstretched hands...
children at play.

OUTSIDENESS

Specks of gold
in the riversand.
Squirming fish-shadows
endlessly creating
vertical strings
of air-pearls.
And far away
at the edge of daylight
the white dot
of a vanishing boat.

Those who have gone
never return.
The sun drags his feet
and a tethered horse
whisks the flies
off his back
with his tail.
Water does not tell tales:
it reflects only
what it sees.

PAWINDAS¹

Blue-grey granite
carved by swirling water
to the semblance
of a bull.

A kingfisher
hovers there a second,
suddenly flies off—
a helping wind.

Across the river
gypsies, their encampment.
Shadows of the pine trees
growing inch by inch.

¹Pawindas is the popular name for an Afghan gypsy tribe.

SHADOW BIRDS

Every night
the nameless birds
fly out across
the jagged skyline
of his mind.

He never asks
where they have come from,
where they go...

Madness, like water,
takes so many shapes.
The wisdom
of astrologers appears
no more than ours.

A child plays with a broken toy.
His widowed mother
washes someone else's clothes...

Someone some day
will cut this knot,
burn both the hangman
and his rope.

SOLILOQUY OF THE FOREST BRIDGE

Narcissus
seduced by its own breath.
The almost scaled mountain
of dreams.
Friable joy. And you
unassuming as an unlit
earthen lamp. Devastated
by more than regret. What
are these words
but intertangled weeds
left behind
by the receding tide.

Wheat
on the threshing floor.
Whorl. Quiet frenzy.
Unsaddled moon falling
from a black cliff.
A new wrench
of pain. This was once
a habitable country. Vineyards
and freshly painted boats.
The heart
is an ice floe. You cannot
outmanoeuvre time.

DOWN THE WITHERED SLOPE

Dome of skull—
rust—erosion—lost tracks.
The crescent moon
licks a new leaf
which slithers
from the night's grasp.
Year rings
in the petrified fossil
of a tree.

Youthful hands—not mine—
scoop up water
from a clear stream.
The wind sketches a self-portrait
on the acquiescent sand.
I hear voices
of those I loved.
Eyes that never sleep—
blind mirrors.

DOESN'T ANYONE WANT A NEW QUILT THIS WINTER?

Raindrops fall—
hesitant, heavy—kicking up
tiny craters of dust.
I lean across
a row of dog-eared books
to shut the window.

Ruffian crows
unceremoniously ejected
from a pomegranate tree.

On the street below
an unkempt cotton-ginner
(his harp-like instrument slung over
his shoulders) spits in loud protest:
doesn't anyone want
a new quilt this winter?

Cloud-pavilions
ransacked by the wind.
Another year slips by—an other year!

THE DAY BRIGHTENS SLOWLY

*H*ow much have they dug up
out of the dumb throat of history?
The charcoal flesh of Chinese queens,
Aztec skulls of rock crystal,
bronze trinkets and rusted spears...

The day brightens slowly
and I try to fix my wandering mind.
Motes in a shaft of sunlight.
These are all rumours...
the exhumation has not yet begun.

So much shrivels in anticipation...
so much is destroyed by regret.
A sidelong glance sparked a dream.
I could never get down to
planning my life.

THE HUNT

Rain-inscribed
these rocks record
the primordial scripture
of a people betrayed
by their kings and priests.
The savage wind
claws at them
from generation to generation.
Rusty nails fall out
when the door burns.

In the blood of sunset
my body remembers
past endearments—
the mid-river island
and the otherworld music
of freedom. The sky
has witnessed
my humiliation. The hunters
stand on the crest
of the hill.

I spit blood. I have swallowed
my screams.

THE PLOUGH AND THE OXEN

*T*he sweat of man and animal
sinks into the moist earth—
heavy drops impervious
to the sun's barbaric thirst.

Children are climbing all over
a broken cartwheel and a young woman
admires herself
in the running mirror of a stream.

A thousand years later
they dig up figurines of gods
and goddesses and a baked-clay jar
half full of blackened wheat.

THE LEAP

Alexander on horseback
leapt over the Indus here,
or so the storytellers say,

and on the other side
of that hill in a grove
of mango trees he listened

in rapt attention
to a naked sadhu
talking of immortality.

THE GIFT

I have read
somewhere
that Buddha
gave a handful
of yellow leaves
to Annanda
and told him
that besides those
there were
many thousands
of other truths
scattered
all over the earth.
It was autumn
and from far away
came the sounds
of oxen-bells.
I, too, have tried
to plumb
the depths
of my being
but found nothing—
neither
brittle truths
nor lush green
lies.

AN ANCIENT INDIAN COIN

Gazelle embossed on a lopsided moon.
Vasanta had only been rendered insensible
by the outrage in the garden.
A sadhu watches his toe-nails grow
in his Himalayan cave.

Men create their own gods
and a learned Brahmin is exempt
from all taxation.
But a piece of gold
does not take one very far.

Out of the seven jade goblets
they dug up
only one was whole.
The king's hunting-dogs are better fed
than most of his subjects.

Look, the Indus is choked with stars
and the glaciers are beginning to melt.
I try to calm myself
but my tongue is smothered
by its own thickness.

Solitude, silence, stone.

A RUINED MONASTERY

Boulders
huge as the elephants
of Porus
and, on the hill,
a ruined monastery.
When did the pilgrims
stop coming?

Waterfall
and a ruptured pool
in which the sunlight
licks its own salt-whiteness.
A dusty track
dotted
with cow dung.

Every
morning and evening,
women from a nearby village
come here
to gossip
and fill their
earthen pots.

A SHADOW IS NOT A MEMORY

A swirl of water
under an ancient bridge...
plumage of stars...
The bubbles come and go...
refracting your image,
whispering your name.

There are flame-mirrors
in every thornbush.
Suddenly years are swallowed up
by the evening mist.
I dream of swelling rivers
and thundering horses.

But the waking mind
has its own bleak resonance.
It broods over faces
it cannot recall—
it leans upon a wall
that is no longer there.

The air smells of rock.
A shadow is not a memory.

A REMOTE BEGINNING

This night too
will collapse
under its own weight
like all the others
that came before.

After the demolition squad:
a featureless crowd
of professional mourners,
premature archaeologists,
daylight's petty thieves...

Where will I find
my true inheritance?
In the mad calligraphy of trees
or a clear plunge into
the pool of many betrayals?

Dreams blossom
only in wakefulness
and all our shadows
come circling back
to a remote beginning.

ANCESTRAL BREAST HOWL

They
sewed him up
alive
in a buffalo-skin
and threw him
from the ramparts
of the imperial fort
down
into the swirling river.

Thunder
of freedom
tunnels the long night—
blood caresses blood.

Web of water
on rock—
fishnet thinner than light
ever moving
ever still.

BARBARIC FLAGS, FLYING

Fingernails
torn off
and then the hands
one by one
like wrinkled gloves—
someone's mad aunt
with fungoid eyes
plucking out
her lice-ridden hair.
Standing
on the high ramparts
one can see
trampled mustard fields.
Crows are eating
carnations of blood.
Badakhshan
and the sad horses
polished by sweat.



BEIRUT

*H*ow brave the music
in those eyelashes
clotted with blood.

Flutes and cymbals—
the smell of bread
hot from the oven.

Many died
dreaming of water—
many were burnt alive.

Shadows everywhere—
the city has become
its own monument.

This mourning
must now cease.
Mother, dry your tears.

Your sons will return.

A NARROW VALLEY

Flash-flood
in a narrow valley.
A bowl of milk
falls
from the hands
of a trembling child.
Mud houses collapse.
Prayers
do not work
at times
such as these.

A JULY AFTERNOON

Poppy flower
all its four sides slit—
white blood
blackening in the sun.

Death is not
the perfection of sleep—
it is a bare mountain
without any rock-shelters.

You pluck out your grey hair
in front of the mirror—
I see dark clouds
and silently pray for rain.

CRYPT

Stone steps
narrowing down
to a scream—
no moss in the interstices.
What have I come
to quarry here?

Remember
that summer evening
on the embankment—
extravagant promises—
a barge
drifting down the river.

Dust
in the narrow lanes—
the mangy fur of dreams—
the sky's surveillance.
Our struggle
brought us nothing.

What
did men worship
in prehistoric times?
Burnt-out stars,
tangled undergrowth,
ruminations of water.

CONFLUENCE

*M*oon-splintered mind
hacking at an obsolete dream.
Sand dunes
and the cry of seagulls.
The desert is within,
so is the sea
and both wait to be crossed.

Ribs like rafters
through which the cold wind blows.
An old man on the beach
takes off his spectacles
and wipes them;
horizons where a grandson
aims his stones.

We all die,
even those
who've not yet lived.
Two streams, distrustful
of each other, meet.
Night opening her mouth
to take the bite.

DRIFTWOOD

The island
one never sees—
cobble lanes—
pomegranate juice
spills over
an earthen cup.
River dolphins
in a luminous mist.
Hiatus
between one breath
and the next.

Fishnets
furred with salt.
Light filters
through the leaves—
subtle refractions
that sustain.
Words merely
fill the gaps.
Is despair
the end
of exultation?

ERASURE

Touch
is the premonition of loss—
drift swelling into a tide—
sub-aqueous glow
that distorts
as much as it reveals.

I dream
of that other life—
straddling sinuous waterfalls—
yearning for the impossible.
Is love clouded
with what we like to believe?

Mirrors
grow old like us. Bleary-eyed.
The flesh sags. Wrinkles appear.
Petals of nostalgia.
I try to salvage
what I can.

ENDURANCE

*L*atticed windows
and a winter sunset
trapped in narrow lanes.
Rain-puddles, unspent lives.
Don't wait—
what you are waiting for
will never come.

A young woman walks past—
blue shawl, gold bracelets,
eyes brighter than the pulsing stars.
I draw the wavering circle
of memory around her face,
but each departure's final
and solitude a perpetual stream.

Time now to measure your losses—
all those bridges
that went up in flames.
This is ice, black ice—
it will not melt.
Nor will the night
erase itself for you.

EXILE

They call him mad
but he's the only one
who understands the beasts and trees
in his old Bukhara carpet.
There, at the centre,
is an elegant samovar
with the aroma of green tea
and the twisted reflections of absent friends.

He takes off his muddied boots,
and thinks for a long while
of the hired assassins pursuing him.

THE REBEL

They
stood him up
against an orchard wall
and shot him
at dawn.

Pandemonium of crows
and then
the empty horizon.

Hundreds of miles away
his mother
kneels in prayer—
in ignorance—
the ignorance of prayer.

Wheat ear on the stubble—
the blind earth
must be fed.

INSOMNIA

The night is tense
as a cobweb
waiting
for the touch of dawn.

Rhythm in everything
despite the stars—
their eyeholes
filled with mercury.

Soon morning comes.
The robber-sparrows
fighting over
every grain of meal.

NIGHT CROSSING

A ropebridge
cuts deep
into the flesh
of hanging skies.

Chalkclay body
sheathed
in a skin
of tarnished silver.

The rain engraves
lizards in the mud.
On the other side
a pack of wild dogs.

Deep down
in swirling darkness
there are whirlpools,
sharp, relentless rocks.

USTAD FATEH ALI KHAN SITAR-NAWAZ

d. 24 November 1981

The peaks
have stopped
talking
to each other.
Music
over the edge
but the pool
is not
large enough. You gave
what you could.
I grope round
my ignorance—
why is
the waterfall
deaf?
Innocence
has crept back
into the dark hills.

THE STREET OF NIGHTINGALES

Soon it will be evening,
exhausted clerks and chattering schoolgirls
all returning home to this—
the liveliest street in town, the web of dreams.

Why *Street of Nightingales* I cannot say.
One thing is certain—there's no escaping
its elaborate trap. My life
took root here several landslides back.

A wide-eyed little boy in yellow socks
cracks walnuts while
our fat old whore-turned-midwife rushes by.
Can no one speak of nightingales?

Then there's the wayside barber—
jokes filthier than his looks.
But what an artist, what consummate skill...
trimming the shaggy hair of our tight-fisted grocer.

Trivial, perhaps—but why do such things
always catch me out, off balance?
Petalled laughter, the pure, rib-breaking
misery of other people's needs.

Barber, grocer, little boy—
just these three taking it easy.
The rest, impatient in their usual hurry.
Even the sky is heading out somewhere.

LANDSCAPE

Three stepping stones
and then the stream—
cascading silver
convoluted glass.
A young woman
wades through knee-deep
to the other side.

Fox-pelts
drying in the sun
and a glacier between barren mountains.

Why don't you admit
that you have forgotten.
The sky
is anchored to trees
which cast no shadows.
There never is any reprieve...
no running away.

A long
uneven path
fogged by the night's breath.

FLOODS

*H*ow does one forgive
the treachery
of blind rivers
and water-buffaloes
dissolving in the mind?

Their hut was
forty years old.
They had
three wooden boxes of dowry
and a sackful of expensive rice.

At the army relief-camp,
the bride-to-be
covers her head
while her parents
look the other way.

WATER-CARRIER

*M*ore patches
on his clothes
than on the empty goatskin
slung over his shoulder.
Like the others
he waits his turn
at the Municipal tap
and to while away
the time
with his teeth
he tears off
the skin
from a sugar-cane.
His feet
know all the backstreets
as intimately
as he knows his night-time
straw-mat.
Twice a day
he delivers water
free
at a nearby mosque
but he
does not
pray there.

PASSING THROUGH

C
l
o
u
d
y autumn sky—
a gust of chilly wind
threatening rain.
Fried fish
washed down with carrot juice
(slightly fermented).
The streets are full.
Only the birdcage
hanging from the branch
of a fig-tree
is empty. Under it
a bearded scribe
(Soloman come back to life)
dips his pen
into an inkwell
and with a flourish
begins a letter
for a woman
whose back is turned
toward me.
Not far away
a little boy is urinating
into an open gutter.

WIDOW

Every evening
she would go down to the river—
wet pebbles and bird-shadows—
but the boat
never came.

Mist like a shroud
and the smoke of cowdung
over which
she cooks for her children—
the river, the river.

The youngest asks:
how much bigger than a scorpion
is death? You should be out
with the others—she scolds—
catching fish.

Mouth stained
by an old dream—glass bangles
and the sounds of a village festival
in her eyes, in her blood—
the river, the river.

BRIDGEHEAD

Surfacing is as hazardous
as the plunge—
the coppery glint
of water pulled up
from the deepest well.

The roar of a dream river,
this morning's bridgehead:
wet golden sand
and a forest of green mirrors
on your waking shoulders.

Perspectives
all so arbitrary—
our lives go hurtling
down the same dark chute...
Millstones, their weight,
their endless hunger.

SEAWOLF

*A*n isthmus
between two warring factions
of the same sea.
I hone my listening
to where the shudder
of thought ends.
Silver sieved
from the surf
and the stars
of a marine galaxy.

Stonecrop
against my crumbling day.
Winter unleashes itself
in the wolf's howl...
The anonymity of falling snow.

THE GOLDEN ORIOLE

I'll never be able
to get her song
out of my head.
Wild rice
from the marshes
and fish baked in mud.
So many died
that they had to be buried
standing up—
there wasn't enough land.
The sky
is a mausoleum of lapis lazuli.
Tree-roots
grope and clutch
and the heart, too, tightens
its grip
in a thunderstorm.
Diminishing
like an echo in the mountains
and yet life stretches
before us
without pause.
Bridle-path
barely visible
in the mist.
A garland of icicles
around my neck.

STONE-RIPPLES

A winter morning:
birds shiver
on bare trees—
dark clenched fists.
Then suddenly
the savage wind
catapults them
into the sky's blind net.
Flame-shadows
on the hearthrug.
A clock ticks
somewhere out of sight.
Rubescent flesh
of roses.
I touch
the frost-fern
on my windowsill—
unhindered future—
thawing
aching.

CORNEA

*M*enhir
of memory
at the river's edge.
Torn fishnets. Wind's spume.
The clutching fingers
of night.

What
were they looking for?
Centuries of darkness.
Blistered feet
and parched throats. Agony.
Stone scorpions.

Void.
The lack that rends.
Unyielding paths. Reality
is but a mind-woven web.
Something stirs
in my deepest blood.

ISTHMUS

Concentric circles of rain
appearing, disappearing
on the concrete pavement.
Perhaps this is
what is meant
by the poetry
of meaning.

We are all prisoners
and the mirror
is a sham
in which
we embrace one another—
it will not shorten
the distance between us.

PRAYER-BEADS

*U*nder the shade
Of a willow tree
Where the river bends
In a rock-pool
Prayer-beads rise
To the surface
From the mouth
Of an invisible fish.

RAIN ON MOSS

Light
bounces off water—
bruised but exultant.
Intimacy
is partial congruence.

I yearn
for the river's broad sweep—
its total embrace.
Cliff
with no footholds.

What
is the matrix of joy?
Willow-catkins
swirling round and round
in the weir.

WINDOWSILL

Sandpaper tongue of a tiger:
every syllable a fatal collision.
A new technique of writing...

The tortured and the torturer
preserved together
frozen in a pictograph.

And love is an avalanche,
not a snowcrystal
under the microscope.

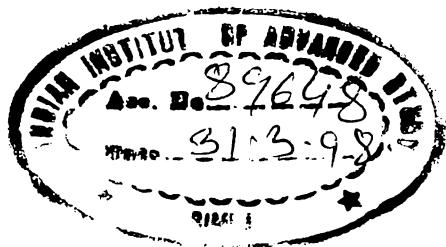
Through walls of water,
I see young men
building a new city.

Somewhere a windowsill
gilded with a new dawn—
something to dream about.

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Daud Kamal is the archaeologist of telling moments, emotions and recognitions. In poems of great economy and precision he brings us his world of wonder and terror, both the 'stars' inviolate beauty' and the 'wolves coming down the mountain'. For him, life is to be seen and experienced in all its tangled wholeness. There is a now to be faced and lived. Memories, hopes and dreams, for all they offer, are no more than temporary shelter. And there are more complexities out there than we can imagine.

Reading the poems, we are confronted, therefore, with an unusual openness and honesty. We are issued no soft answers, poetic or otherwise. Each and every fragile philosophy is hard won and authentically so. Through such honesty, the sheer tactility of the imagery and the zen-like focus he brought to bear, Daud Kamal achieved the very order it was his life's work to uncover.

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