

Two Poems about 'Ashura'

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Article

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The Night before Ashura'

If I was in Karbala on this night

the last night before the end,

I would witness Heaven and Hell

spread out before me,

Heaven blocked from Furat,

Heaven prostrating to God,

Hell surrounding Furat,

and forgetting their God.

I would witness in the tents of Husayn

Oil lamps illuminating faces weeping in prayer.

I would witness the last Isha salat of

him who rode on the shoulders of the Prophet.

I would witness the love in the faces of the companions

as they prayed their last behind him.

I would witness the shining eagerness of the boy

for whom tomorrow's death is sweeter than honey .

I would witness the flag bearer with a little girl on his knees.

I would notice that his arms are still intact.

Tomorrow, Sukayna, your uncle will not be here.

They will rip out your earrings and lash you with whips.

Stay close to him for as long as can.

I would witness a man bowed with grief and shame,

making his way towards Heaven,

and being embraced by one so tender and forgiving,

that he overlooks the deed that led to this end.

From the forgiven I would witness the steam of Hell leaving,

and a breeze of Heaven wafting through.

On the last night,

the night before the end,

if I tread softly through the tents,

I would witness dry water bags,

and children rolling their sandpaper tongues on parched lips

acutely aware of the sound of the gushing of the river water near

and also of the savages blocking the way there.

I would witness a mother with no milk to feed

the baby who's thirst would at last be quenched

by the blood from a spear to his tiny throat.

I would witness a woman

who's a sister foremost and then a mother

preparing her sons for the slaughter tomorrow,

when her heart will be wrenched many times over

and she'll cry out to the desert as she witnesses her brother,
fall on the plains of Naynawa.

A woman who'd lose it all,
except for her faith,
which would be the strength of Karbala.

I would witness a man restless with fever
who would awaken later to find him self clad in chains,
leaving his family lying unburied, slaughtered in the plains,
as he drags his feet, whipped to Sham.

It is the night before the day
Zhu'lfanah will weep
as he returns shamefacedly to the camp, his back bare,
with blood of his master dripping down his flanks
The night before the day the Zhulfiqar will go back in sheath
Having done its duty yet again.

If I was in Karbala on this night,
I would hear sounds caressing the desert.
From one side I'd hear the calls of *al atash al atash*
and murmurs of praises to the Lord
and see tents glowing with *noor*
and from the other I'd hear wicked laughter
and swords sharpening on hearts made of stone

and see their wretched tents ablaze in hellfire.

It would be the night before the day

when on one side horses will cool their thirst with water,

on the other the thirsty household of the Prophet

will be slaughtered like no animal before.

It is the night before the day

the stars and the angels and the cosmos will weep

as they witness the final *sujjud*

of a body so brutally cloaked in arrows,

the forehead couldn't touch the ground.

On this night he prostrates with angels behind

But tomorrow the angels will shield their eyes,

when his blessed head is butchered with a knife so dull

that the heavens will cry out.

If I was in Karbala on this night,

the night before the end,

and this is what lay in sight

surely I'd pour sand on my head,

and I wonder where I'd end.

Would I cower in the background like the Kufans?

Or join you in quenching my thirst from the banks of Kauthar?

Is there Anyone to Help You?

You called out,

deserted on the sands of Karbala,

with the shameless swords of the traitors glinting with malice before you,

you called out,

Is there anyone to help me?

That day the answer for you was silence.

That day your companions could not jump to your side.

That day Abbas could not respond with his sword held high.

That day they lay still on the plains of Karbala

with the East wind blowing dust over their bodies

and you looked out into the face of evil,

the Prophet betrayed, and you alone.

I wish I could say today your call has been answered.

I wish I could say today the millions of us are there with you in the plains of Karbala,

that we call out with a resounding answer that echoes over the world,

trembles mountain ranges and weakens the knees of any oppressor,

shatters the pillars of any tyrant

strikes hope in to eyes of the oppressed,

and lightens the world with our love for you,

an answer that holds the ferocity of Abbas as he thundered towards Furat,

and answer that has the daring fury of Zaynab as she slammed Yazid in his court

an answer that has the urgent and basic love that moved Ali Asghar to fall off his cradle.

an answer that mimics the fierce loyalty of the shuhada that lay
in the battlefield that day and you were alone.

You were alone.

But not again, I wish to say. It would not happen again.

The streets shrouded in black,

the handkerchiefs weighty with tears,

the hearts that cry out for you

the compassion, the pain,

the sorrow that wrings out from every bosom—

all an ardent reply to your call,

that we are here, that we care.

I long to say that this time your army will not be seventy-two.

This time masses of millions will march along you.

The glint of our combined swords will light the world.

The proof of our loyalty the tears that we have wept

and these black shrouds on our backs.

This time around, you will not be alone Imam,

We have answered your call, I hunger to say.

But today I still hear your call.

It echoes from the orphans of Iraq,

It comes resoundingly from the tyrannized in Palestine,

from the helpless in Africa,

the terrorized in Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, India

From every land, in every language your call,

Is there anyone to help me

stalks and haunts the world.

It goes unheard, ignored, abused,

but so defiantly loud in the pale eyes of the child

who whimpers at the gun pointed at him.

Does your despair not simmer in the eyes of the child

who's only view of the world is from behind barbed wires?

Can I not hear the choking sobs of Umm Rabab

When a mother buries her child in Gaza under the rain of bombs?

Can I not hear the weeping of Sukayna on the headless body of her father

when a girl screams as her father blows up into smithereens?

Can I not hear the wails of Al Atash, Al Atash

coming from the refugee tents set up in my country?

Can I not hear the screams in the desert night when the tents burnt to ashes

coming from the family that watches, terrified as their neighborhood is bulldozed by army tanks.

In the desperate eyes of each and every single one of them,

I can hear them echoing your call,

your call to *me*

Is there anyone to help me?

Are they abandoned like you on the battlefield?

The graves of today's martyrs are fresh, moist with blood,
their Yazids still stand, spitting out lies to the world.

How could I say every day is not Ashura?

How could I say every land is not Karbala?

I wish to so much to say to you

to somehow be able to meet your eyes and tell you

that we are not like the cowardly backstabbing Kufans

that we are not like the stone hearted Yazidis

that we are answering your call,

that *we* are there to help you

but today, when I look out into the world

and the clamour of oppression deafens me

I tremble to say I still hear a silence.

I hear a silence that echoes the hush of the desert on the day of Ashura,

a silence which is a blessing for a Yazid

a silence that stifles any hope,

a silence that brings the end so much closer,

a silence that *is* oppression

the silence you were met with.

It is that silence that I hear still today...

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