

Poetry Series

NAZIM HIKMET
- poems -

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NAZIM HIKMET(-June 3,1963, Moscow))

Poet, playwright, novelist, memoirist

INTRODUCTION to Selected Poetry of Nazim Hikmet

Translations by. Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk

NAZIM HIKMET, popularly known and critically acclaimed in Turkey as the first and foremost modern Turkish poet, is known around the world as one of the greatest international poets of the twentieth century, and his poetry has been translated into more than fifty languages. Born in 1902 in Salonika, where his father was in the foreign service, Hikmet grew up in Istanbul. His mother was an artist, and his pasha grandfather wrote poetry; through their circle of friends Hikmet was introduced to poetry early; publishing first poems at seventeen. He attended the Turkish naval academy, but during the Allied occupation of Istanbul following the First World War, he left to teach in eastern Turkey. In 1922, after a brief first marriage ended in annulment, he crossed the border and made his way to Moscow, attracted by the Russian Revolution and its promise of social justice. At Moscow University he got to know students and artists from all over the world. Hikmet returned to Turkey in 1924, after the Turkish War of Independence, but was soon arrested for working on a leftist magazine. In 1926 he managed to escape to Russia, where he continued writing poetry and plays, met Mayakovsky, and worked with Meyerhold. A general amnesty allowed him to return to Turkey in 1928. Since the Communist Party had been outlawed by then, he found himself under constant surveillance by the secret police and spent five of the next ten years in prison on a variety of trumped-up charges. In 1933, for example, he was jailed for putting illegal posters, but when his case came to trial, it was thrown out of court for lack of evidence. Meanwhile, between 1929 and 1936 he published nine books - five collections and four long poems- that revolutionized Turkish poetry, flouting Ottoman literary conventions and introducing free verse and colloquial diction. While these poems established him as a new major poet, he also published several plays and novels and worked as a bookbinder, proofreader, journalist, translator, and screenwriter to support an extended family that included his second wife, her two children, and his widowed mother.

Then, in January 1938 he was arrested for inciting the Turkish armed forces to revolt and sentenced to twenty-eight years in prison on the grounds that military cadets were reading his poems, particularly "The Epic of Sheik Bedrettin." Published in 1936, this long poem based on a fifteenth-century peasant rebellion against Ottoman rule was his last book to appear in Turkey during his lifetime. His friend Pablo Neruda relates Hikmet's account of how he was treated after his arrest: "Accused of attempting to incite the Turkish navy into rebellion, Nazim

was condemned to the punishments of hell. The trial was held on a warship. He told me he was forced to walk on the ship's bridge until he was too weak to stay on his feet, then they stuck him into a section of the latrines where the excrement rose half a meter above the floor. My brother poet felt his strength failing him: my tormentors are keeping an eye on me, they want to watch me suffer. His strength came back with pride. He began to sing, low at first, then louder, and finally at the top of his lungs. He sang all the songs, all the love poems he could remember, his own poems, the ballads of the peasants, the people's battle hymns. He sang everything he knew. And so he vanquished the filth and his torturers.*" In prison, Hikmet's Futurist-inspired, often topical early poetry gave way to poems with a more direct manner and a more serious tone. Enclosed in letters to his family and friends, these poems were subsequently circulated in manuscript. He not only composed some of his greatest lyrics in prison, but produced, between 1941 and 1945, his epic masterpiece, *Human Landscapes*. He also learned such crafts as weaving and woodworking in order to support himself and his family. In the late Forties, while still in prison, he divorced his second wife and married for a third time. In 1949 an international committee, including Pablo Picasso, Paul Robeson, and Jean Paul Sartre, was formed in Paris to campaign for Hikmet's release, and in 1950 he was awarded the World Peace Prize. The same year, he went on an eighteen-day hunger strike, despite a recent heart attack, and when Turkey's first democratically elected government came to power, he was released in a general amnesty.

Five Lines

To overcome lies in the heart, in the streets, in the books
from the lullabies of the mothers
to the news report that the speaker reads,
understanding, my love, what a great joy it is,
to understand what is gone and what is on the way.

NAZIM HIKMET

I Love You

I love you

like dipping bread into salt and eating

Like waking up at night with high fever

and drinking water, with the tap in my mouth

Like unwrapping the heavy box from the postman

with no clue what it is

fluttering, happy, doubtful

I love you

like flying over the sea in a plane for the first time

Like something moves inside me

when it gets dark softly in Istanbul

I love you

Like thanking God that we live.

NAZIM HIKMET

I Think Of You...

I think of you
and I feel the scent of my mother
my mother, the most beautiful of all.

You are on the carousel of the festival inside me
you hover around, your skirt and your hair flying
Mere seconds between finding your beautiful face and losing it.

What is the reason,
why do I remember you like a wound on my heart
what is the reason that I hear your voice when you are so far
and I can't help getting up with excitement?

I kneel down and look at your hands
I want to touch your hands
but I can't
you are behind a glass.
Sweetheart, I am a bewildered spectator of the drama
that I am playing in my twilight.

NAZIM HIKMET

I Want To Die Before You

I
want to die before you.
I
want to die before you.
Do you think that who passes later
will find who's gone before?
I don't think so.
You'd better have me burned,
and put me on the stove in your room
in a jar.
The jar shall be made of glass,
transparent, white glass
so that you can see me inside...
You see my sacrifice:
I renounced from being part of the earth,
I renounced from being a flower
to be able to stay with you.
And I am becoming dust,
to live with you.
Later, when you also die,
you'll come to my jar.
And we'll live there together
your ash in my ash,
until a careless bride
or an unfaithful grandson
throws us out of there...
But we
until that time
will mix
with each other
so much that
even in the garbage we are thrown into
our grains will fall side by side.
We will dive into the soil together.
And one day, if a wild flower
feeds from this piece of soil and blossoms
above its body, definitely
there will be two flowers:
one is you

one is me.

I

don't think of death yet.

I will give birth to a child.

Life is flooding from me.

My blood is boiling.

I will live, but long, very long,

but with you.

Death doesn't scare me either.

But I find our way of funeral

rather unlikable.

Until I die,

I think this will get better.

Is there a hope you'll get out of prison these days?

A voice in me says:

maybe.

NAZIM HIKMET

Letter To My Wife

11-11-1933

Bursa Prison

My one and only!

Your last letter says:

'My head is throbbing,
my heart is stunned! '

You say:

'If they hang you,
if I lose you,
I'll die! '

You'll live, my dear-

my memory will vanish like black smoke in the wind.

Of course you'll live, red-haired lady of my heart:

in the twentieth century

grief lasts

at most a year.

Death-

a body swinging from a rope.

My heart

can't accept such a death.

But

you can bet

if some poor gypsy's hairy black

spidery hand

slips a noose

around my neck,

they'll look in vain for fear

in Nazim's

blue eyes!

In the twilight of my last morning

I

will see my friends and you,

and I'll go

to my grave

regretting nothing but an unfinished song...

My wife!
Good-hearted,
golden,
eyes sweeter than honey-my bee!
Why did I write you
they want to hang me?
The trial has hardly begun,
and they don't just pluck a man's head
like a turnip.

Look, forget all this.
If you have any money,
buy me some flannel underwear:
my sciatica is acting up again.
And don't forget,
a prisoner's wife
must always think good thoughts.

NAZIM HIKMET

On Living

I

Living is no joke,
you must live with great seriousness
like a squirrel for example,
I mean expecting nothing except and beyond living,
I mean living must be your whole occupation.

You must take living seriously,
I mean to such an extent that,
for example your arms are tied from your back, your back is on the wall,
or in a laboratory with your white shirt, with your huge eye glasses,
you must be able to die for people,
even for people you have never seen,
although nobody forced you to do this,
although you know that
living is the most real, most beautiful thing.

I mean you must take living so seriously that,
even when you are seventy, you must plant olive trees,
not because you think they will be left to your children,
because you don't believe in death although you are afraid of it
because, I mean, life weighs heavier.

II

Suppose we're very sick, in need of surgery,
I mean, there is the possibility that
we will never get up from the white table.
although it is impossible not to feel the grief of passing away somewhat too soon
we will still laugh at the funny joke being told,
we will look out of the window to see if it's raining,
or we will wait impatiently
for the latest news from agencies.

Suppose, for something worth fighting for,
suppose we are on the battlefield.
Over there, in the first attack, on the first day
we may fall on the ground on our face.

We will know this with a somewhat strange grudge,
but we will still wonder like crazy
the result of the war that will possibly last for years.

Suppose we are in the jail,
age is close to fifty,
suppose there are still eighteen years until the iron door will open.
Still, we will live with the outer world,
with the people, animals, fights and winds
I mean, with the outer world beyond the walls.

I mean, however and wherever we are
we must live as if there is no death...

III

This earth will cool down,
a star among all the stars,
one of the tiniest,
I mean a grain of glitter in the blue velvet,
I mean this huge world of ours.

This earth will cool down one day,
not even like a pile of ice
or like a dead cloud,
it will roll like an empty walnut
in the pure endless darkness.

You must feel the pain of this now,
You must feel the grief right now.
You must love this world so much
to be able to say 'I lived'...

NAZIM HIKMET

On Living I

Living is no laughing matter:
you must live with great seriousness
like a squirrel, for example-
I mean without looking for something beyond and above living,
I mean living must be your whole occupation.
Living is no laughing matter:
you must take it seriously,
so much so and to such a degree
that, for example, your hands tied behind your back,
your back to the wall,
or else in a laboratory
in your white coat and safety glasses,
you can die for people-
even for people whose faces you've never seen,
even though you know living
is the most real, the most beautiful thing.
I mean, you must take living so seriously
that even at seventy, for example, you'll plant olive trees-
and not for your children, either,
but because although you fear death you don't believe it,
because living, I mean, weighs heavier.

NAZIM HIKMET

On Living II

Let's say you're seriously ill, need surgery -
which is to say we might not get
from the white table.

Even though it's impossible not to feel sad
about going a little too soon,
we'll still laugh at the jokes being told,
we'll look out the window to see it's raining,
or still wait anxiously
for the latest newscast...

Let's say we're at the front-
for something worth fighting for, say.
There, in the first offensive, on that very day,
we might fall on our face, dead.

We'll know this with a curious anger,
but we'll still worry ourselves to death
about the outcome of the war, which could last years.

Let's say we're in prison
and close to fifty,
and we have eighteen more years, say,
before the iron doors will open.

We'll still live with the outside,
with its people and animals, struggle and wind-
I mean with the outside beyond the walls.

I mean, however and wherever we are,
we must live as if we will never die.

NAZIM HIKMET

On Living Iii

This earth will grow cold,
a star among stars
and one of the smallest,
a gilded mote on blue velvet-
I mean this, our great earth.
This earth will grow cold one day,
not like a block of ice
or a dead cloud even
but like an empty walnut it will roll along
in pitch-black space...
You must grieve for this right now
-you have to feel this sorrow now-
for the world must be loved this much
if you're going to say ``I lived"...

NAZIM HIKMET

The Japanese Fisherman

A young Japanese fisherman was killed
by a cloud at sea.

I heard this song from his friends,
one lurid yellow evening on the Pacific.

Those who eat the fish we caught, die.
Those who touch our hands, die,
This ship is a black coffin,
you'll die if you come up the gangplank.

Those who eat the fish we caught, die,
not straight away, but slowly,
slowly their flesh rots, falls off.
Those who eat the fish we caught, die.

Those who touch our hands, die.
Our loyal, hardworking hands
washed by salt and sun.
Those who touch our hands, die,
not straight away, but slowly,
slowly their flesh rots, falls off.
Those who touch our hands, die.

Almond Eyes, forget me.
This ship is a black coffin,
you'll die if you come up the gangplank.
The cloud has passed over us.

Almond Eyes, forget me.
Don't hug me my darling,
you'll catch death from me.
Almond Eyes, forget me.

This ship is a black coffin.
Almond Eyes, forget me.
The child you have from me
will be rotten from a rotten egg.

This ship is a black coffin.
This sea is a dead sea.
Human beings, where are you?
Where are you?

NAZIM HIKMET

The Miniature Woman

The Blue-Eyed Giant, the Miniature Woman
and the Honeysuckle

He was a blue-eyed giant,
He loved a miniature woman.
The woman's dream was of a miniature house
with a garden where honeysuckle grows
in a riot of colours
that sort of house.

The giant loved like a giant,
and his hands were used to such big things
that the giant could not
make the building,
could not knock on the door
of the garden where the honeysuckle grows
in a riot of colours
at that house.

He was a blue-eyed giant,
he loved a miniature woman,
a mini miniature woman.
The woman was hungry for comfort
and tired of the giant's long strides.
And bye bye off she went to the embraces of a rich dwarf with a garden where
the honeysuckle grows
in a riot of colours
that sort of house.

Now the blue-eyed giant realizes,
a giant isn't even a graveyard for love:
in the garden where the honeysuckle grows
in a riot of colours
that sort of house...

NAZIM HIKMET

The Walnut Tree

my head foaming clouds, sea inside me and out
I am a walnut tree in Gulhane Park
an old walnut, knot by knot, shred by shred
Neither you are aware of this, nor the police

I am a walnut tree in Gulhane Park
My leaves are nimble, nimble like fish in water
My leaves are sheer, sheer like a silk handkerchief
pick, wipe, my rose, the tear from your eyes
My leaves are my hands, I have one hundred thousand
I touch you with one hundred thousand hands, I touch Istanbul
My leaves are my eyes, I look in amazement
I watch you with one hundred thousand eyes, I watch Istanbul
Like one hundred thousand hearts, beat, beat my leaves

I am a walnut tree in Gulhane Park
neither you are aware of this, nor the police

NAZIM HIKMET

Thinking Of You

Thinking of you is pretty, hopeful,
It is like listening to the most beautiful song
From the most beautiful voice on earth...
But hope is not enough for me any more,
I don't want to listen to songs any more,
I want to sing.

NAZIM HIKMET

You Are My Drunkenness

You are my drunkenness...
I did not sober up, as if I can do that;
I don't want to anyway.
I have a headache, my knees are full of scars
I am in mud all around
I struggle to walk towards your hesitant light.

NAZIM HIKMET