

Classic Poetry Series

Nizar Qabbani
- poems -

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Nizar Qabbani(1923 - 1998)

Qabbani was revered by generations of Arabs for his sensual and romantic verse. His work was featured not only in his two dozen volumes of poetry and in regular contributions to the Arabic-language newspaper Al Hayat, but in lyrics sung by Lebanese and Syrian vocalists who helped popularize his work.

Through a lifetime of writing, Qabbani made women his main theme and inspiration. He earned a reputation for daring with the publication in 1954 of his first volume of verse, "Childhood of a Breast," whose erotic and romantic themes broke from the conservative traditions of Arab literature. The suicide of his sister, who was unwilling to marry a man she did not love, had a profound effect on Qabbani. Thereafter, he expressed resentment of male chauvinism and often wrote from a woman's viewpoint and advocated social freedoms for women.

He had lived in London since 1967 but the Syrian capital remained a powerful presence in his poems, most notably in "The Jasmine Scent of Damascus."

After the Arab defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, he founded the Nizar Qabbani publishing house in London, and his became a powerful and eloquent voice of lament for Arab causes.

Qabbani was a committed Arab nationalist and in recent years his poetry and other writings, including essays and journalism, had become more political. His writing also often fused themes of romantic and political despair.

Qabbani's later poems included a strong strain of anti-authoritarianism. One couplet in particular -- "O Sultan, my master, if my clothes are ripped and torn it is because your dogs with claws are allowed to tear me" -- is sometimes quoted by Arabs as a kind of wry shorthand for their frustration with life under dictatorship.

His second wife, Balqis al-Rawi, an Iraqi teacher whom he had met at a poetry recital in Baghdad, was killed in a bomb attack by pro-Iranian guerrillas in Beirut, where she was working for the cultural section of the Iraqi Ministry.

Nizar Qabbani died in London of a heart attack at the age of 75.

A Brief Love Letter

My darling, I have much to say
Where o precious one shall I begin ?
All that is in you is princely
O you who makes of my words through their meaning
Cocoons of silk
These are my songs and this is me
This short book contains us
Tomorrow when I return its pages
A lamp will lament
A bed will sing
Its letters from longing will turn green
Its commas be on the verge of flight
Do not say: why did this youth
Speak of me to the winding road and the stream
The almond tree and the tulip
So that the world escorts me wherever I go ?
Why did he sing these songs ?
Now there is no star
That is not perfumed with my fragrance
Tomorrow people will see me in his verse
A mouth the taste of wine, close-cropped hair
Ignore what people say
You will be great only through my great love
What would the world have been if we had not been
If your eyes had not been, what would the world have been?

Nizar Qabbani

A Damascene Moon

Green Tunisia, I have come to you as a lover
On my brow, a rose and a book
For I am the Damascene whose profession is passion
Whose singing turns the herbs green
A Damascene moon travels through my blood
Nightingales . . . and grain . . . and domes
From Damascus, jasmine begins its whiteness
And fragrances perfume themselves with her scent
From Damascus, water begins . . . for wherever
You lean your head, a stream flows
And poetry is a sparrow spreading its wings
Over Sham . . . and a poet is a voyager
From Damascus, love begins . . . for our ancestors
Worshipped beauty, they dissolved it, and they melted away
From Damascus, horses begin their journey
And the stirrups are tightened for the great conquest
From Damascus, eternity begins . . . and with her
Languages remain and genealogies are preserved
And Damascus gives Arabism its form
And on its land, epochs materialize

Nizar Qabbani

A Lesson In Drawing

My son places his paint box in front of me
and asks me to draw a bird for him.
Into the color gray I dip the brush
and draw a square with locks and bars.
Astonishment fills his eyes:
'... But this is a prison, Father,
Don't you know, how to draw a bird?'
And I tell him: 'Son, forgive me.
I've forgotten the shapes of birds.'

My son puts the drawing book in front of me
and asks me to draw a wheatstalk.
I hold the pen
and draw a gun.
My son mocks my ignorance,
demanding,
'Don't you know, Father, the difference between a
wheatstalk and a gun?'
I tell him, 'Son,
once I used to know the shapes of wheatstalks
the shape of the loaf
the shape of the rose
But in this hardened time
the trees of the forest have joined
the militia men
and the rose wears dull fatigues
In this time of armed wheatstalks
armed birds
armed culture
and armed religion
you can't buy a loaf
without finding a gun inside
you can't pluck a rose in the field
without its raising its thorns in your face
you can't buy a book
that doesn't explode between your fingers.'

My son sits at the edge of my bed
and asks me to recite a poem,

A tear falls from my eyes onto the pillow.
My son licks it up, astonished, saying:
'But this is a tear, father, not a poem!'
And I tell him:
'When you grow up, my son,
and read the diwan of Arabic poetry
you'll discover that the word and the tear are twins
and the Arabic poem
is no more than a tear wept by writing fingers.'

My son lays down his pens, his crayon box in
front of me
and asks me to draw a homeland for him.
The brush trembles in my hands
and I sink, weeping.

Nizar Qabbani

A Letter From A Stupid Woman

(A Letter to a Man)

(1)

My dear Master,
This is a letter from a stupid woman
Has a stupid woman before me, written to you?
My name? Lets put names aside
Rania, or Zaynab
or Hind or Hayfa
The silliest thing we carry, my Master - are names

(2)

My Master:
I am frightened to tell you my thoughts
I am frightened - if I did -
that the heavens would burn
For your East, my dear Master,
confiscate blue letters
confiscate dreams from the treasure chests of women
Practices suppression, upon the emotions of women
It uses knives...
and cleavers...
to speak to women
and butchers spring and passions
and black plaits
And your East, dear Master,
Manufactures the delicate crown of the East
from the skulls of women

(3)

Don't criticize me, Master
If my writing is poor
For I write and the sword is behind my door
And beyond the room is the sound of wind and howling dogs
My master!
'Antar al Abys is behind my door!

He will butcher me
If he saw my letter
He will cut my head off
If I spoke of my torture
He will cut my head off
If he saw the sheerness of my clothes
For your East, my dear Master,
Surrounds women with spears
And your East, my dear Master
elects the men to become Prophets,
and buries the women in the dust.

(4)

Don't become annoyed!
My dear Master, from these lines
Don't become annoyed!
If I smash the complaints blocked for centuries
If I unsealed my consciousness
If I ran away...
From the domes of the Harem in the castles
If I rebelled, against my death...
against my grave, against my roots...
and the giant slaughter house....

Don't become annoyed, my dear Master,
If I revealed to you my feelings
For the Eastern man
Is not concerned with poetry or feelings
The Eastern man - and forgive my insolence - does not understand women
but over the sheets.

(5)

I am sorry my master -If I have insolently attacked the kingdom of Men
for the great literature of course -
is the literature of men
And love has always been
the allotment of men...
And sex has always been
a drug sold to men

A senile fairytale, the freedom of women in our countries
For there is no freedom
Other than, the freedom of men...

My Master

Say all you wish of me. It does not matter to me:
Shallow.. Stupid.. Crazy.. Simple minded.
It does not concern me anymore..
For whoever writes about her concerns...
in the logic of Men is called
a stupid woman
and didn't I tell you in the beginning
that I am a stupid woman?

Nizar Qabbani

Balqees

Balqees. . . oh princess,
You burn, caught between tribal wars,
What will I write about the departure of my queen?
Indeed, words are my scandal. . . .
Here we look through piles of victims
For a star that fell, for a body strewn like fragments of a mirror.
Here we ask, oh my love:
Was this your grave
Or the grave of Arab nationalism?
I won't read history after today,
My fingers are burned, my clothes bedecked with blood,
Here we are entering the stone age. . . .
Each day we regress a thousand years.
What does poetry say in this era, Balqees?
What does poetry say in the cowardly era. . . ?
The Arab world is crushed, repressed, its tongue cut. . . .
We are crime personified. . . .
Balqees . . .
I beg your forgiveness.
Perhaps your life was the ransom of my own,
Indeed I know well
That the purpose of those who were entangled in murder was to kill
 my words!
Rest in God's care, oh beautiful one,
Poetry, after you, is impossible. . . .

Nizar Qabbani

Barada

Barada, oh father of all rivers
Oh, horse that races the days
Be, in our sad history, a prophet
Who receives inspiration from his lord
Millions acknowledge you as an Arab
Prince . . . so pray as an imam

Oh eyes of the gazelle in the desert of Sham
Look down. This is the age of lavender
They have detained you in the pavilions for a long time
We have woven tents from tears
God has witnessed that we have broken no promise
Or secured protection for those we love

Nizar Qabbani

Beirut, The Mistress Of The World

Beirut, the Mistress of the World
We confess before the One God
That we were envious of you
That your beauty hurt us
We confess now
That we've maltreated and misunderstood you
And we had no mercy and didn't excuse you
And we offered you a dagger in place of flowers!
We confess before the fair God
That we injured you, alas; we tired you
That we vexed you and made you cry
And we burdened you with our insurrections

O Beirut
The world without you won't suffice us
We now realize your roots are deep inside us,
We now realize what offence we've perpetrated
Rise from under the rubble
Like a flower of Almond in April
Get over your sorrow
Since revolution grows in the wounds of grief
Rise in honor of the forests,
Rise in honor of the rivers
Rise in honor of humankind
Rise, O Beirut!

Nizar Qabbani

Between Us

Between us
twenty years of age
between your lips and my lips
when they meet and stay
the years collapse
the glass of a whole life shatters.

The day I met you I tore up
all my maps
and my prophecies
like an Arab stallion I smelled the rain
of you
before it wet me
heard the pulse of your voice
before you spoke
undid your hair with my hands
before you had braided it

There is nothing I can do
nothing you can do
what can the wound do
with the knife on the way to it?

Your eyes are like a night of rain
in which ships are sinking
and all I wrote is forgotten
In mirrors there is no memory.

God how is it that we surrender
to love giving it the keys to our city
carrying candles to it and incense
falling down at its feet asking
to be forgiven
Why do we look for it and endure
all that it does to us
all that it does to us?

Woman in whose voice
silver and wine mingle

in the rains
From the mirrors of your knees
the day begins its journey
life puts out to sea

I knew when I said
I love you
that I was inventing a new alphabet
for a city where no one could read
that I was saying my poems
in an empty theater
and pouring my wine
for those who could not
taste it.

When God gave you to me
I felt that He had loaded
everything my way
and unsaid all His sacred books.

Who are you
woman entering my life like a dagger
mild as the eyes of a rabbit
soft as the skin of a plum
pure as strings of jasmine
innocent as children's bibs
and devouring like words?

Your love threw me down
in a land of wonder
it ambushed me like the scent
of a woman stepping into an elevator
it surprised me
in a coffee bar
sitting over a poem
I forgot the poem
It surprised me
reading the lines in my palm
I forgot my palm
It dropped on me like a blind deaf
wildfowl
its feathers became tangled with mine

its cries were twisted with mine

It surprised me
as I sat on my suitcase
waiting for the train of days
I forgot the days
I traveled with you
to the land of wonder

Your image is engraved
on the face of my watch
It is engraved on each of the hands
It is etched on the weeks
months years
My time is no longer mine
it is you

Nizar Qabbani

Bread, Hashish And Moon

When the moon is born in the east,
And the white rooftops drift asleep
Under the heaped-up light,
People leave their shops and march forth in groups
To meet the moon
Carrying bread, and a radio, to the mountaintops,
And their narcotics.
There they buy and sell fantasies
And images,
And die - as the moon comes to life.
What does that luminous disc
Do to my homeland?
The land of the prophets,
The land of the simple,
The chewers of tobacco, the dealers in drug?
What does the moon do to us,
That we squander our valor
And live only to beg from Heaven?
What has the heaven
For the lazy and the weak?
When the moon comes to life they are changed to
corpses,
And shake the tombs of the saints,
Hoping to be granted some rice, some children...
They spread out their fine and elegant rugs,
And console themselves with an opium we call fate
And destiny.
In my land, the land of the simple
What weakness and decay
Lay hold of us, when the light streams forth!
Rugs, thousands of baskets,
Glasses of tea and children swarn over the hills.
In my land,
where the simple weep,
And live in the light they cannot perceive;
In my land,
Where people live without eyes,
And pray,
And fornicate,

And live in resignation,
As they always have,
Calling on the crescent moon:
' O Crescent Moon!
O suspended God of Marble!
O unbelievable object!
Always you have been for the east, for us,
A cluster of diamonds,
For the millions whose senses are numbed'

On those eastern nights when
The moon waxes full,
The east divests itself of all honor
And vigor.
The millions who go barefoot,
Who believe in four wives
And the day of judgment;
The millions who encounter bread
Only in their dreams;
Who spend the night in houses
Built of coughs;
Who have never set eyes on medicine;
Fall down like corpses beneath the light.

In my land,
where the stupid weep
And die weeping
Whenever the crescent moon appears
And their tears increase;
Whenever some wretched lute moves them...
or the song to 'night'
In my land,
In the land of the simple,
where we slowly chew on our unending songs-
A form of consumption destroying the east-
Our east chewing on its history,
its lethargic dreams,
Its empty legends,
Our east that sees the sum of all heroism
In Picaresque Abu Zayd al Hilali.

Clarification To My Poetry-Readers

And of me say the fools:
I entered the lodges of women
And never left.
And they call for my hanging,
Because about the matters of my beloved
I, poetry, compose.
I never traded
Like others
In Hashish.
I never stole.
I never killed.
I, in broad day, have loved.
Have I sinned?

And of me say the fools:
With my poetry
I violated the sky's commands.
Said who
Love is
The honor-ravager of the sky?
The sky is my intimate.
It cries if I cry,
Laughs if I laugh
And its stars
Greatens their brilliance
If
One day I fall in love.
What so
If in the name of my beloved I chant,
And like a chestnut tree
In every capital I, her, plant.

Fondness will remain my calling,
Like all prophets.
And infancy, innocence
And purity.
I will write of my beloved's matters
Till I melt her golden hair
In the sky's gold.

I am,
And I hope I change not,
A child
Scribbling on the stars' walls
The way he pleases,
Till the worth of love
In my homeland
Matches that of the air,
And to love dreamers I become
A diction-ary,
And over their lips I become
An A
And a B.

Nizar Qabbani

Damascus, What Are You Doing To Me?

1

My voice rings out, this time, from Damascus
It rings out from the house of my mother and father
In Sham. The geography of my body changes.
The cells of my blood become green.
My alphabet is green.
In Sham. A new mouth emerges for my mouth
A new voice emerges for my voice
And my fingers
Become a tribe

2

I return to Damascus
Riding on the backs of clouds
Riding the two most beautiful horses in the world
The horse of passion.
The horse of poetry.
I return after sixty years
To search for my umbilical cord,
For the Damascene barber who circumcised me,
For the midwife who tossed me in the basin under the bed
And received a gold lira from my father,
She left our house
On that day in March of 1923
Her hands stained with the blood of the poem...

3

I return to the womb in which I was formed . . .
To the first book I read in it . . .
To the first woman who taught me
The geography of love . . .
And the geography of women . . .

4

I return
After my limbs have been strewn across all the continents
And my cough has been scattered in all the hotels
After my mother's sheets scented with laurel soap
I have found no other bed to sleep on . . .

And after the "bride" of oil and thyme
That she would roll up for me
No longer does any other 'bride' in the world please me
And after the quince jam she would make with her own hands
I am no longer enthusiastic about breakfast in the morning
And after the blackberry drink that she would make
No other wine intoxicates me . . .

5

I enter the courtyard of the Umayyad Mosque
And greet everyone in it
Corner to . . . corner
Tile to . . . tile
Dove to . . . dove
I wander in the gardens of Kufi script
And pluck beautiful flowers of God's words
And hear with my eye the voice of the mosaics
And the music of agate prayer beads
A state of revelation and rapture overtakes me,
So I climb the steps of the first minaret that encounters me
Calling:
"Come to the jasmine"
"Come to the jasmine"

6

Returning to you
Stained by the rains of my longing
Returning to fill my pockets
With nuts, green plums, and green almonds
Returning to my oyster shell
Returning to my birth bed
For the fountains of Versailles
Are no compensation for the Fountain Café
And Les Halles in Paris
Is no compensation for the Friday market
And Buckingham Palace in London
Is no compensation for Azem Palace
And the pigeons of San Marco in Venice
Are no more blessed than the doves in the Umayyad Mosque
And Napoleon's tomb in Les Invalides
Is no more glorious than the tomb of Salah al-Din Al-Ayyubi...

7

I wander in the narrow alleys of Damascus.
Behind the windows, honeyed eyes awake
And greet me . . .
The stars wear their gold bracelets
And greet me
And the pigeons alight from their towers
And greet me
And the clean Shami cats come out
Who were born with us . . .
Grew up with us . . .
And married with us . . .
To greet me . . .

8

I immerse myself in the Buzurriya Souq
Set a sail in a cloud of spices
Clouds of cloves
And cinnamon . . .
And camomile . . .
I perform ablutions in rose water once.
And in the water of passion many times . . .
And I forget—while in the Souq al-'Attarine—
All the concoctions of Nina Ricci . . .
And Coco Chanel . . .
What are you doing to me Damascus?
How have you changed my culture? My aesthetic taste?
For I have been made to forget the ringing of cups of licorice
The piano concerto of Rachmaninoff . . .
How do the gardens of Sham transform me?
For I have become the first conductor in the world
That leads an orchestra from a willow tree!!

9

I have come to you . . .
From the history of the Damascene rose
That condenses the history of perfume . . .
From the memory of al-Mutanabbi
That condenses the history of poetry . . .
I have come to you . . .
From the blossoms of bitter orange . . .
And the dahlia . . .

And the narcissus . . .
And the 'nice boy' . . .
That first taught me drawing . . .
I have come to you . . .
From the laughter of Shami women
That first taught me music . . .
And the beginning of adolescence
From the spouts of our alley
That first taught me crying
And from my mother's prayer rug
That first taught me
The path to God . . .

10

I open the drawers of memory
One . . . then another
I remember my father . . .
Coming out of his workshop on Mu'awiya Alley
I remember the horse-drawn carts . . .
And the sellers of prickly pears . . .
And the cafés of al-Rubwa
That nearly—after five flasks of `araq—
Fall into the river
I remember the colored towels
As they dance on the door of Hammam al-Khayyatin
As if they were celebrating their national holiday.
I remember the Damascene houses
With their copper doorknobs
And their ceilings decorated with glazed tiles
And their interior courtyards
That remind you of descriptions of heaven . . .

11

The Damascene House
Is beyond the architectural text
The design of our homes . . .
Is based on an emotional foundation
For every house leans . . . on the hip of another
And every balcony . . .
Extends its hand to another facing it
Damascene houses are loving houses . . .
They greet one another in the morning . . .

And exchange visits . . .
Secretly—at night . . .

12

When I was a diplomat in Britain
Thirty years ago
My mother would send letters at the beginning of Spring
Inside each letter . . .
A bundle of tarragon . . .
And when the English suspected my letters
They took them to the laboratory
And turned them over to Scotland Yard
And explosives experts.
And when they grew weary of me . . . and my tarragon
They would ask: Tell us, by god . . .
What is the name of this magical herb that has made us dizzy?
Is it a talisman?
Medicine?
A secret code?
What is it called in English?
I said to them: It's difficult for me to explain...
For tarragon is a language that only the gardens of Sham speak
It is our sacred herb . . .
Our perfumed eloquence
And if your great poet Shakespeare had known of tarragon
His plays would have been better . . .
In brief . . .
My mother is a wonderful woman . . . she loves me greatly . . .
And whenever she missed me
She would send me a bunch of tarragon . . .
Because for her, tarragon is the emotional equivalent
To the words: my darling . . .
And when the English didn't understand one word of my poetic argument . . .
They gave me back my tarragon and closed the investigation . . .

13

From Khan Asad Basha
Abu Khalil al-Qabbani emerges . . .
In his damask robe . . .
And his brocaded turban . . .
And his eyes haunted with questions . . .
Like Hamlet's

He attempts to present an avant-garde play
But they demand Karagoz's tent . . .
He tries to present a text from Shakespeare
They ask him about the news of al-Zir . . .
He tries to find a single female voice
To sing with him . . .
"Oh That of Sham"
They load up their Ottoman rifles,
And fire into every rose tree
That sings professionally . . .
He tries to find a single woman
To repeat after him:
"Oh bird of birds, oh dove"
They unsheathe their knives
And slaughter all the descendents of doves . . .
And all the descendents of women . . .
After a hundred years . . .
Damascus apologized to Abu Khalil al-Qabbani
And they erected a magnificent theater in his name.

14

I put on the jubbah of Muhyi al-Din Ibn al-Arabi
I descend from the peak of Mt. Qassiun
Carrying for the children of the city . . .
Peaches
Pomegranates
And sesame halawa . . .
And for its women . . .
Necklaces of turquoise . . .
And poems of love . . .
I enter . . .
A long tunnel of sparrows
Gillyflowers . . .
Hibiscus . . .
Clustered jasmine . . .
And I enter the questions of perfume . . .
And my schoolbag is lost from me
And the copper lunch case . . .
In which I used to carry my food . . .
And the blue beads
That my mother used to hang on my chest
So People of Sham

He among you who finds me . . .
let him return me to Umm Mu'ataz
And God's reward will be his
I am your green sparrow . . . People of Sham
So he among you who finds me . . .
let him feed me a grain of wheat . . .
I am your Damascene rose . . . People of Sham
So he among you who finds me . . .
let him place me in the first vase . . .
I am your mad poet . . . People of Sham
So he among you who sees me . . .
let him take a souvenir photograph of me
Before I recover from my enchanting insanity . . .
I am your fugitive moon . . . People of Sham
So he among you who sees me . . .
Let him donate to me a bed . . . and a wool blanket . . .
Because I haven't slept for centuries

Nizar Qabbani

Damascus, What Are You Doing To Me?

Lovers Card

My voice rings out, this time, from Damascus
It rings out from the house of my mother and father
In Sham. The geography of my body changes.
The cells of my blood become green.
My alphabet is green.
In Sham. A new mouth emerges for my mouth
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And my fingers
Become a tribe

return to Damascus
Riding on the backs of clouds
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To search for my umbilical cord,
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On that day in March of 1923
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And the clean Shami cats come out
Who were born with us . . .
Grew up with us . . .
And married with us . . .
To greet me . . .

I immerse myself in the Buzurriya Souq
Set a sail in a cloud of spices
Clouds of cloves
And cinnamon . . .
And camomile . . .
I perform ablutions in rose water once.
And in the water of passion many times . . .
And I forget—while in the Souq al-'Attarine—
All the concoctions of Nina Ricci . . .
And Coco Chanel . . .
What are you doing to me Damascus?
How have you changed my culture? My aesthetic taste?
For I have been made to forget the ringing of cups of licorice
The piano concerto of Rachmaninoff . . .
How do the gardens of Sham transform me?
For I have become the first conductor in the world
That leads an orchestra from a willow tree!!

I have come to you . . .
From the history of the Damascene rose
That condenses the history of perfume . . .
From the memory of al-Mutanabbi
That condenses the history of poetry . . .
I have come to you . . .
From the blossoms of bitter orange . . .
And the dahlia . . .
And the narcissus . . .
And the 'nice boy' . . .
That first taught me drawing . . .
I have come to you . . .
From the laughter of Shami women
That first taught me music . . .
And the beginning of adolescence

From the spouts of our alley
That first taught me crying
And from my mother's prayer rug
That first taught me
The path to God . . .

I open the drawers of memory
One . . . then another
I remember my father . . .
Coming out of his workshop on Mu'awiya Alley
I remember the horse-drawn carts . . .
And the sellers of prickly pears . . .
And the cafés of al-Rubwa
That nearly—after five flasks of `araq—
Fall into the river
I remember the colored towels
As they dance on the door of Hammam al-Khayyatin
As if they were celebrating their national holiday.
I remember the Damascene houses
With their copper doorknobs
And their ceilings decorated with glazed tiles
And their interior courtyards
That remind you of descriptions of heaven . . .

The Damascene House
Is beyond the architectural text
The design of our homes . . .
Is based on an emotional foundation
For every house leans . . . on the hip of another
And every balcony . . .
Extends its hand to another facing it
Damascene houses are loving houses . . .
They greet one another in the morning . . .
And exchange visits . . .
Secretly—at night . . .

When I was a diplomat in Britain
Thirty years ago
My mother would send letters at the beginning of Spring
Inside each letter . . .
A bundle of tarragon . . .
And when the English suspected my letters

They took them to the laboratory
And turned them over to Scotland Yard
And explosives experts.
And when they grew weary of me . . . and my tarragon
They would ask: Tell us, by god . . .
What is the name of this magical herb that has made us dizzy?
Is it a talisman?
Medicine?
A secret code?
What is it called in English?
I said to them: It's difficult for me to explain...
For tarragon is a language that only the gardens of Sham speak
It is our sacred herb . . .
Our perfumed eloquence
And if your great poet Shakespeare had known of tarragon
His plays would have been better . . .
In brief . . .
My mother is a wonderful woman . . . she loves me greatly . . .
And whenever she missed me
She would send me a bunch of tarragon . . .
Because for her, tarragon is the emotional equivalent
To the words: my darling . . .
And when the English didn't understand one word of my poetic argument . . .
They gave me back my tarragon and closed the investigation . . .

Nizar Qabbani

Dialogue

Do not say my love was
A ring or a bracelet.
My love is a siege,
Is the daring and headstrong.
Who, searching sail out to their death.

Do not say my love was
A moon.
My love is a burst of sparks.

Nizar Qabbani

Every Time I Kiss You

Every time I kiss you
After a long separation
I feel
I am putting a hurried love letter
In a red mailbox.

Translated by B. Frangieh And C. Brown

Submitted by Noele Aabye

Nizar Qabbani

Five Letters To My Mother

Good morning sweetheart.
Good morning my Saint of a sweetheart.
It has been two year mother
since the boy has sailed
on his mythical journey.
Since he hid within his luggage
the green morning of his homeland
and her stars, and her streams,
and all of her red poppy.
Since he hid in his cloths
bunches of mint and thyme,
and a Damascene Lilac.

*

I am alone.
The smoke of my cigarette is bored,
and even my seat of me is bored
My sorrows are like flocking birds looking for a grain field in season.
I became acquainted with the women of Europe,
I became acquainted with their tired civilization.
I toured India, and I toured China,
I toured the entire oriental world,
and nowhere I found,
a Lady to comb my golden hair.
A Lady that hides for me in her purse a sugar candy.
A lady that dresses me when I am naked,
and lifts me up when I fall.
Mother: I am that boy who sailed,
and still longes to that sugar candy.
So how come or how can I, Mother,
become a father and never grow up.

*

Good morning from Madrid.
How is the 'Fullah'?
I beg you to take care of her,
That baby of a baby.
She was the dearest love to Father.
He spoiled her like his daughter.

He used to invite her to his morning coffee.
He used to feed her and water her,
and cover her with his mercy.
And when he died,
She always dreamt about his return.
She looked for him in the corners of his room.
She asked about his robe,
and asked about his newspaper,
and asked, when the summer came,
about the blue color of his eyes,
so that she can throw within his palms,
her golden coins.

*

I send my best regards
to a house that taught us love and mercy.
To your white flowers,
the best in the neighborhood.
To my bed, to my books,
to all of the kids in the alley.
To all of these walls we covered
with noise from our writings.
To the lazy cat sleeping on the balcony.
To the lilac climbing bush the neighbor's window.
It has been two long years, Mother,
with the face of Damascus being like a bird,
digging within my conscience,
biting at my curtains,
and picking, with a gentle beak, at my fingers.
It has been two years Mother,
since the nights of Damascus,
the odors of Damascus,
the houses of Damascus,
have been inhabiting our imagination.
The pillar lights of her mosques,
have been guiding our sails.
As if the pillars of the Amawi,
have been planted in our hearts.
As if the orchards are still perfuming our conscience.
As if the lights and the rocks,
have all traveled with us.

*

This is September, Mother,
and here is sorrow bringing me his wrapped gifts.
Leaving at my window his tears and his concerns.
This is September, where is Damascus?
Where is Father and his eyes.
Where is the silk of his glances,
and where is the aroma of his coffee.
May God bless his grave.
And where is the vastness of our large house,
and where is its comfort.
And where is the stairwell laughing at the tickles of blooms,
and where is my childhood.
Draggling the tail of the cat,
and eating from the grape vine,
and snipping from the lilac.

**

Damascus, Damascus,
what a poem we wrote within our eyes.
What a pretty child that we crucified.
We kneeled at her feet,
and we melted in her passion,
until, we killed her with love.

Nizar Qabbani

Fragments From Notes On The Book Of Defeat

If an audience could be arranged
and also my safe return
this is what I'd tell the Sultan
This is what he'd learn:
O Sultan, my master, if my clothes
are ripped and torn
it is because your dogs with claws
are allowed to tear me.
And your informers every day are those
who dog my heels, each step
unavoidable as fate.
They interrogate my wife, at length,
and list each friend's name.
Your soldiers kick and beat me,
force me to eat from my shoes,
because I dare approach these walls
for an audience with you.
You have lost two wars
and no one tells you why.
Half your people have no tongues.
What good their unheard sigh?
The other half, within these walls,
run like rabbits and ants,
silently inside.
If I were given safety
from the Sultan's armed guards
I would say, O Sultan,
the reason you've lost wars twice
was because you've been walled in from
mankind's cause and voice.

Nizar Qabbani

I Am With Terrorism

We are accused of terrorism:
if we defended rose and woman
and the mighty verse ...
and the blueness of sky ...
A dominion .. nothing left therein...
No water, no air ..
No tent, no camel,
and not even dark Arabica coffee!!

We are accused of terrorism:
if we defended with guts
the hair of Balqis
and the lips of Maysun
if we defended Hind, and Da`d
Lubna and Rabab ..
and the stream of Kohl
coming down from their lashes like the verses of revelation.
You will not find with me
a secret poem
or a secret logos
or books I put behind doors.
I do not even have one poem
walking down the street, wearing veil.

We are accused of terrorism:
if we wrote about the ruins of a homeland
torn, weak ...
a homeland with no address
and an nation with no names

I seek the remnants of a homeland
none of its grand poems is left
except the bemoans of Khansa.

I seek a dominion in whose horizons
no freedom can be found
red .. blue or yellow.

A homeland forbidding us from bying a newspaper

or listening to the news.

A dominion wherein birds are forbidden
from chirping.

A homeland wherein, out of terror [ru`b],
its writers got accustomed to write about
nothing.

A homeland, in the likeness of poetry in our lands:

It is vain talk,
no rhythm,
imported

Ajam, with a crooked face and tongue:

No beginning

No end

No relation with people's worry

mother earth

and the crisis of man.

A dominion ...

going to peace talks

with no honor

no shoe.

A homeland,

men peed in their pans ..

women are those left to defend honor.

Salt in our eyes

Salt in our lips

Salt in our words

Can the self carry such dryness?

An inheritance we got from the barren Qahtan?

In our nation, no Mu`awiya, and no Abu Sufiyan

No one is left to say 'NO'

and face the quitters

they gave up our houses, our bread and our [olive] oil.

They transformed our bright history into a mediocre store.

In our lives, no poem is left,

since we lost our chastity in the bed of the Sultan.

They got accustomed to us, the humbled.

What is left to man

when all that remains
is disgrace.

I seek in the books of history
Ussamah ibn al-Munqith
Uqba ibn Nafi`
Omar, and Hamzah
and Khalid, driving his flocks conquering the Shem.
I seek a Mu`tasim Billah
Saving women from the cruelty of rape
and the fire.

I seek latter days men
All I can see is frightened cats
Scared for their own souls, from
the sultanship of mice.

Is this an overwhelming national blindness?
Are we blind to colors?

We are accused of terrorism
If we refuse to die
with Israel's bulldozers
tearing our land
tearing our history
tearing our Evangelium
tearing our Koran
tearing the graves of our prophets
If this was our sin,
then, lo, how beautiful terrorism is?

We are accused of terrorism
if we refused to be effaced
by the hands of the Mogul, Jews and Barbarians
if we throw a stone
at the glass of the the Security Council
after the Ceasar of Ceasars got a hold of it.

We are accused of terrorism
if we refuse to negotiate with the wolf
and shake the hand with a whore
America

Against the cultures of the peoples
with no culture
Against the civilizations of the civilized
with no civilization
America
a mighty edifice
with no walls!

We are accused of terrorism:
if we refused an era
America became
the foolish, the rich, the mighty
translated, sworn
in Hebrew.

We are accused of terrorism:
if we throw a rose
to Jerusalem
to al-Khalil
to Ghazza
to an-Nasirah
if we took bread and water
to beleaguered Troy.

We are accused of terrorism:
if we raised our voices against
the regionalists of our leaders.
All changed their rides:
from Unionists
to Brokers.

If we committed the heinous crime of culture
if we revolted against the orders of the grand caliph
and the seat of the caliphate
If we read jurisprudence or politics
If we recalled God
and read verse al-Fat-h
[that Chapter of Conquest].
If we listened to the Friday sermon
then we are well-established in the art of terrorism

We are accused of terrorism

if we defended land
and the honor of dust
if we revolted against the rape of people
and our rape
if we defended the last palm trees in our desert
the last stars in our sky
the last syllabi of our names
the last milk in our mothers' bosoms
if this was our sin
how beautiful is terrorism.

I am with terrorism
if it is able to save me
from the immigrants from Russia
Romania, Hungaria, and Poland

They settled in Palestine
set foot on our shoulders
to steal the minarets of al-Quds
and the door of Aqsa
to steal the arabesques
and the domes.

I am with terrorism
if it will free the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth,
and the virgin, Meriam Betula
and the holy city
from the ambassadors of death and desolation

Yesteryear
The nationalist street was fervent
like a wild horse.
The rivers were abundant with the spirit of youth.

But after Olso,
we no longer had teeth:
we are now a blind and lost people.

We are accused of terrorism:
if we defended with full-force
our poetic heritage
our national wall

our rosy civilization
the culture of flutes in our mountains
and the mirrors displaying blackened eyes.

We are accused of terrorism:
if we defended what we wrote
El azure of our sea
and the aroma of ink
if we defended the freedom of the word
and the holiness of books

I am with terrorism
if it is able to free a people
from tyrants and tyranny
if it is able to save man from the cruelty of man
to return lemon, olive tree, and bird to the South of Lebanon
and the smile back to Golan

I am with terrorism
if it will save me
from the Caesar of Yehuda
and the Caesar of Rome

I am with terrorism
as long as this new world order
is shared
between America and Israel
half-half

I am with terrorism
with all my poetry
with all my words
and all my teeth
as long as this new world
is in the hands of a butcher.

I am with terrorism
if the U.S. Senate
enacts judgment
decrees reward and punishment

I am with Irhab [terrorism]

as long this new world order
hates the smell of A`rab.

I am with terrorism
as long as the new world order
wants to slaughter my off-spring.
and send them to dogs.

For all this
I raise my voice high:
I am with terrorism
I am with terrorism
I am with terrorism ...

Nizar Qabbani

I Conquer The World With Words

I conquer the world with words,
conquer the mother tongue,
verbs, nouns, syntax.

I sweep away the beginning of things
and with a new language
that has the music of water the message of fire
I light the coming age
and stop time in your eyes
and wipe away the line
that separates
time from this single moment.

Nizar Qabbani

I Have No Power

'I have no power to change you
or explain your ways
Never believe a man can change a woman
Those men are pretenders
who think
that they created woman
from one of their ribs
Woman does not emerge from a man's rib's, not ever,
it's he who emerges from her womb
like a fish rising from depths of water
and like streams that branch away from a river
It's he who circles the sun of her eyes
and imagines he is fixed in place

I have no power to tame you
or domesticate you
or mitigate your first instincts
This task is impossible
I've tested my intelligence on you
also my dumbness
Nothing worked with you, neither guidance
nor temptation
Stay primitive as you are

I have no power to break your habits
for thirty years you have been like this
for three hundred years
a storm trapping in a bottle
a body by nature sensing the scent of a man
assaults it by nature
triumphs over it by nature

Never believe what a man says about himself
that he is the one who makes the poems
and makes the children
It is the woman who writes the poems
and the man who signs his name to them
It is the woman who bears the children
and the man who signs at the maternity hospital

that he is the father

I have no power to change your nature
my books are of no use to you
and my convictions do not convince you
nor does my fatherly council do you any good
you are the queen of anarchy, of madness, of belonging
to no one
Stay that way
You are the tree of femininity that grows in the dark
needs no sun or water
you the sea princess who has loved all men
and loved no one
slept with all men... and slept with no one
you are the Bedouin woman who went with all the tribes
and returned a virgin
Stay that way.'

Nizar Qabbani

In The Summer

In the summer
I stretch out on the shore
And think of you
Had I told the sea
What I felt for you,
It would have left its shores,
Its shells,
Its fish,
And followed me.

Translated by B. Frangieh And C. Brown

Submitted by Noele Aabye

Nizar Qabbani

Jerusalem

I wept until my tears were dry
I prayed until the candles flickered
I knelt until the floor creaked
I asked about Mohammed and Christ
Oh Jerusalem, the fragrance of prophets
The shortest path between earth and sky
Oh Jerusalem, the citadel of laws
A beautiful child with fingers charred
and downcast eyes
You are the shady oasis passed by the Prophet
Your streets are melancholy
Your minarets are mourning
You, the young maiden dressed in black
Who rings the bells in the Nativity
On Saturday morning?
Who brings toys for the children
On Christmas eve?
Oh Jerusalem, the city of sorrow
A big tear wandering in the eye
Who will halt the aggression
On you, the pearl of religions?
Who will wash your bloody walls?
Who will safeguard the Bible?
Who will rescue the Quran?
Who will save Christ?
Who will save man?
Oh Jerusalem my town
Oh Jerusalem my love
Tomorrow the lemon trees will blossom
And the olive trees will rejoice
Your eyes will dance
The migrant pigeons will return
To your sacred roofs
And your children will play again
And fathers and sons will meet
On your rosy hills
My town
The town of peace and olives.

Jogging

We stood in columns
like sheep before slaughter
we ran, breathless
We scrambled to kiss
the shoes of the killers. . . .
They stole Jesus the son of Mary
while he was an infant still.
They stole from us the memory of the orange trees
and the apricots and the mint
and the candles in the mosques.
In our hands they left
a sardine can called Gaza
and a dry bone called Jericho.
They left us a body with no bones
A hand with no fingers.
After this secret romance in Oslo
we came out barren.
They gave us a homeland
smaller than a single grain of wheat
a homeland to swallow without water
like aspirin pills.
Oh, we dreamed of a green peace
and a white crescent
and a blue sea.
Now we find ourselves
on a dung-heap.

Nizar Qabbani

Language

When a man is in love
how can he use old words?
Should a woman
desiring her lover
lie down with
grammarians and linguists?

I said nothing
to the woman I loved
but gathered
love's adjectives into a suitcase
and fled from all languages.

Nizar Qabbani

Letter From Under The Sea

If you are my friend...
Help me...to leave you
Or if you are my lover...
Help me...so I can be healed of you...
If I knew....
that the ocean is very deep...I would not have swam...
If I knew...how I would end,
I would not have began

I desire you...so teach me not to desire
teach me...
how to cut the roots of your love from the depths
teach me...
how tears may die in the eyes
and love may commit suicide

If you are prophet,
Cleanse me from this spell
Deliver me from this atheism...
Your love is like atheism...so purify me from this atheism

If you are strong...
Rescue me from this ocean
For I don't know how to swim
The blue waves...in your eyes
drag me...to the depths
blue...
blue...
nothing but the color blue
and I have no experience
in love...and no boat...

If I am dear to you
then take my hand
For I am filled with desire...from my
head to my feet

I am breathing under water!
I am drowning...

drowning...
drowning...

Nizar Qabbani

Light Is More Important Than The Lantern

Light is more important than the lantern,
The poem more important than the notebook,
And the kiss more important than the lips.
My letters to you
Are greater and more important than both of us.
They are the only documents
Where people will discover
Your beauty
And my madness.

Translated by B. Frangieh And C. Brown

Submitted by Noele Aabye

Nizar Qabbani

Love Compared

I do not resemble your other lovers, my lady
should another give you a cloud
I give you rain
Should he give you a lantern, I
will give you the moon
Should he give you a branch
I will give you the trees
And if another gives you a ship
I shall give you the journey.

Nizar Qabbani

Maritime Poem

In the blue harbor of your eyes
Blow rains of melodious lights,
Dizzy suns and sails
Painting their voyage to endlessness.

In the blue harbor of your eyes
Is an open sea window,
And birds appear in the distance
Searching for islands still unborn.

In the blue harbor of your eyes
Snow falls in July.
Ships laden with turquoise
Spill over the sea and are not drowned.

In the blue harbor of your eyes
I run on the scattered rocks like a child
Breathing the fragrance of the sea
And return an exhausted bird.

In the blue harbor of your eyes
Stones sing in the night.
Who has hidden a thousand poems
In the closed book of your eyes?

If only, if only I were a sailor,
If only somebody'd give me a boat,
I would furl my sails each evening
In the blue harbor of your eyes.

Nizar Qabbani

My Angry Cat

You're repeating yourself
for the twentieth time.
Is there another man in my life?
Yes. Yes. What did you think?
Even graveyards have visitors.
There are, my dear sir,
a lot of men out there,
and no garden is ever devoid of birds.
You're just an experience I had,
and here I am,
tired and bored from this experience,
out from under your spell.
I'm cured of all
my weakness and gullibility.
Niceties do, after all, always end.
You love me!
There you go again,
dredging up all that ancient history.
And since when did you ever show
the slightest interest in me
outside the contour of my hips?
Where does this sudden gush of love come from?
I was never anything more
than a forsaken chair
among your expensive furniture,
a garden you chose to raze
without shame or repentance.
Why are you staring at my breasts
as if you owned them?
And why do you weep as if you
stood before a lost kingdom?
Your glorious kingdom, dear sir,
has just crumbled.
There. I've settled my score
in an instant.
You tell me now
who's losing the game.
I opened myself to you
like the Garden of Eden,

gave you all the sweet fruit
and green grass you desired.
Today I offer you
neither heaven nor hell.
This is what you get
for acting the ungrateful.
You faithless. If you'd only treated me
like a human being - just once -
this other man wouldn't exist.

Nizar Qabbani

My Lady

You were the most important woman in my history
before the leaving of this year
you're most important woman
after the birth of this year
you're a woman i can't count it with hours and days
you're a woman made of the poetry nectar
and from the Dreams' Gold
you're a woman were living in my body
before a million years

My Lady

the one who was made of Cotton and Clouds
the one who i can call her a Rain of Jewel
and the River of Nahound
and a Row forest
the one who siwmmes in the water of my heart like a fish
the one who lives in the eyes like a folk of pigeons
nothing will change in my emotion
nor my feelings
not even in my heart or my faith
because i'll stay in the islamic religion

My Lady

do not care about the harmony of time
nor about the name of the years
you're a woman and you'll still as woman
and in everytime
i will still Love you
when the 21 century enter
and when the 25 century enter
and when the 29 century enter
and I will Love you
when the seas dries
and the forst burns

Nizar Qabbani

My Love (Do Not Ask Me)

Do not ask me, the name of my love
I fear for you, from the fragrance of perfume
contained in a bottle, if you smashed it,
drowning you, in spilled scent

By God, if you even croaked a letter,
Lilacs would pile up on the paths

Do not look for it here in my chest
I have left it to run with the sunset

You can see it in the laughter of doves
In the flutter of butterflies
In the ocean, in the breathing of dales
and in the song of every nightingale
in the tears of winter, when winter cries
in the giving of a generous cloud

Do not ask about his lips...as elegant as the sunset
And his eyes, a shore of purity
And his waist, the sway of a branch
Charms...which no book has contained
Nor described by a literate's feather
And his chest, his throat, enough for you

I won't breath his name, my lover...

Nizar Qabbani

My Lover Asks Me

My lover asks me:

"What is the difference between me and the sky?"

The difference, my love,

Is that when you laugh,

I forget about the sky.

Translated by B. Frangieh And C. Brown

Submitted by Noele Aabye

Nizar Qabbani

Oh, My Love

Oh, my love
If you were at the level of my madness,
You would cast away your jewelry,
Sell all your bracelets,
And sleep in my eyes.

Translated by B. Frangieh And C. Brown

Submitted by Noele Aabye

Nizar Qabbani

On Entering The Sea

Love happened at last,
And we entered God's paradise,
Sliding
Under the skin of the water
Like fish.
We saw the precious pearls of the sea
And were amazed.
Love happened at last
Without intimidation...with symmetry of wish.
So I gave...and you gave
And we were fair.
It happened with marvelous ease
Like writing with jasmine water,
Like a spring flowing from the ground.

Nizar Qabbani

Raise Me More Love...

raise me more love... raise me
my prettiest fits of madness
O' dagger's journey... in my flesh
and knife's plunge...
sink me further my lady...
the sea calls me
add to me more death ...
perhaps as death slays me... I'm revived
your body is my map...
the world's map no longer concerns me...
I am the oldest capital of sadness...
and my wound a Pharaonic engraving
my pain... extends like an oil patch
from Beirut... to China...
my pain... a caravan...dispatched
by the Caliphs of 'A'Chaam'... to China...
in the seventh century of the 'Birth'...
and lost in a dragon's mouth...
bird of my heart... 'naysani'
O' sand of the sea, and forests of olives
O' taste of snow, and taste of fire...
my heathen flavor, and insight
I feel scared of the unknown... shelter me
I feel scared of the darkness... embrace me
I feel cold... cover me up
tell me children stories...
rest beside me...
Chant to me...
since from the start of creation
I've been searching for a homeland to my forehead...
for a woman's hair...
that writes me on the walls... then erases me...
for a woman's love... to take me
to the borders of the sun... and throws me...
from a woman's lip... as she makes me
like dust of powdered gold...
shine of my life. my fan
my lantern. declaration of my orchards
stretch me a bridge with the scent of oranges...

and place me like an ivory comb...
in the darkness of your hair... then forget me
I am a drop of water... ambivalent
remaining in the notebook of October
your love crushes me...
like a mad horse from the Caucasus throwing me under its hoofs...
and gargles with the water of my eyes...
add to me more fury... add to me
O' prettiest fits of my madness
for your sake I set free my women
and effaced my birth certificate
and cut all my arteries...

Nizar Qabbani

School Of Love

Your love taught me how to grieve,
And for centuries I needed a woman to make me grieve,
I needed a woman
To make me cry on her shoulders like a bird,
I needed a woman to collect my pieces like broken glass.
Oh my lady, your love taught me the worst of my habits,
It taught me how to drink coffee a thousand times every night,
It taught me how to visit doctors and ask soothsayers,
It taught me to go out to scan the streets,
To seek your face in the rain and in the lights,
To chase your shadow in the faces of strangers,
To hunt your aura even in the newspapers!
Your love showed me the sadness city,
Which I have never entered ere you,
I have never known that the tear is humane,

And the human without tears is just a memory!
Your love taught me
How to draw your face on the walls with chalk like kids,
It taught me how love can change the map of times,
It taught me that when I love,
The earth stands still!
Your love showed me what hallucination is,
It taught me how to love you in every little thing,
In the bare, autumn trees,
In the falling, yellow leaves,
In the rain,
In every cafeteria in which we drank our black coffee,
My lady, your love taught me to sleep in nameless hotels,
And to sit by nameless shores,
It taught me to weep without tears,
Your love taught me how to grieve,
And for centuries I needed a woman to make me grieve,
I needed a woman
To make me cry on her shoulders like a bird,
I needed a woman to collect my pieces like broken glass,

Nizar Qabbani

Sultan

If I were promised safety,
if I could meet the Sultan
I would say to him: O my lord the Sultan!
my cloak has been torn by your ravenous dogs,
your spies are following me all the time.
Their eyes
their noses
their feet are chasing me
like destiny, like fate
They interrogate my wife
and write down all the names of my friends.
O Sultan!
Because I dare to approach your deaf walls,
because I tried to reveal my sadness and
tribulation,
I was beaten with my shoes.
O my lord the Sultan!
you have lost the war twice
because half our people
has no tongue.

Nizar Qabbani

The Child Scribbles

My fault, my greatest fault,
O sea-eyed princess,
was to love you
as a child loves.

The greatest lovers,
after all, are children
My first mistake
and not my last
was to live
in the taste of wonder
ready to be amazed
by the simple span
of night and day,

and ready for every woman
I loved to break me
into a thousand pieces to make
me an open city,
and to leave me behind her
as dust.

My weakness was to see
the world with the logic of a child.

And my mistake was dragging
love out of its cave into the open air,
making my breast
an open church for all lovers.

Nizar Qabbani

The Epic Of Sadness

Your love taught me to grieve
and I have been in need, for centuries
a woman to make me grieve
for a woman, to cry upon her arms
like a sparrow
for a woman to gather my pieces
like shards of broken crystal

Your love has taught me, my lady, the worst habits
it has taught me to read my coffee cups
thousands of times a night
to experiment with alchemy,
to visit fortune tellers

It has taught me to leave my house
to comb the sidewalks
and search your face in raindrops
and in car lights
and to peruse your clothes
in the clothes of unknowns
and to search for your image
even.....even.....
even in the posters of advertisements
your love has taught me
to wander around, for hours
searching for a gypsies hair
that all gypsies women will envy
searching for a face, for a voice
which is all the faces and all the voices...

Your love entered me...my lady
into the cities of sadness
and I before you, never entered
the cities of sadness
I did not know...
that tears are the person
that a person without sadness
is only a shadow of a person...

Your love taught me
to behave like a boy
to draw your face with chalk
upon the wall
upon the sails of fishermen's boats
on the Church bells, on the crucifixes,
your love taught me, how love,
changes the map of time...
Your love taught me, that when I love
the earth stops revolving,
Your love taught me things
that were never accounted for
So I read children's fairytales
I entered the castles of Jennies
and I dreamt that she would marry me
the Sultan's daughter
those eyes..
clearer than the water of a lagoon
those lips...
more desirable than the flower of pomegranates
and I dreamt that I would kidnap her like a knight and I dreamt that I would give
her necklaces of pearl and coral
Your love taught me, my lady,
what is insanity
it taught me...how life may pass
without the Sultan's daughter arriving

Your love taught me
How to love you in all things
in a bare winter tree,
in dry yellow leaves
in the rain, in a tempest,
in the smallest cafe, we drank in,
in the evenings...our black coffee

Your love taught me...to seek refuge
to seek refuge in hotels without names
in churches without names...
in cafes without names...

Your love taught me...how the night
swells the sadness of strangers

It taught me...how to see Beirut
as a woman...a tyrant of temptation
as a woman, wearing every evening
the most beautiful clothing she possesses
and sprinkling upon her breasts perfume
for the fisherman, and the princes
Your love taught me how to cry without crying
It taught me how sadness sleeps
Like a boy with his feet cut off
in the streets of the Rouche and the Hamra

Your love taught me to grieve
and I have been needing, for centuries
a woman to make me grieve
for a woman, to cry upon her arms
like a sparrow
for a woman to gather my pieces
like shards of broken crystal

Nizar Qabbani

The Face Of Qana

The face of Qana
Pale, like that of Jesus
and the sea breeze of April...
Rains of blood.. and tears..
2

They entered Qana stepping on our charred bodies
Raising a Nazi flag
in the lands of the South
and rehearsing its stormy chapters
Hitler cremated them in the gas chambers
and they came after him to burn us
Hitler kicked them out of Eastern Europe
and they kicked us out of our lands
3

They entered Qana
Like hungry wolves
Putting to fire the house of the Messiah
Stepping on the dress of Hussain
and the dear land of the South
4

Blasted Wheat, Olive-trees and Tobacco
and the melodies of the nightingale
Blasted Cadmus in his bark
Blasted sea and the gulls
Blasted even hospitals
even nursing moms
and schoolboys
Blasted the beauty of the Southern women
and murdered the gardens of the honeyed eyes
5

We saw the tears in Ali's eyes
We heard his voice as he prayed
under the rain of bloody skies
6

Who ever will write about the history of Qana
Will inscribe in his parchments
This was the second Karbala
7

Qana unveiled what was hidden
We saw America
Wearing the old coat of a Jewish Rabbi
Leading the slaughter
Blasting our children for no reason
Blasting our wives for no reason
Blasting our trees for no reason
Blasting our thoughts for no reason
Has it been decreed in her constitution,
She, America, mistress of the world,
In Hebrew .. that she should humble us al-Arab?
8

Has it been decreed that each time a ruler in America
wants to win the presidency that he should kill us ..
We al Arab?
9

We waited for one Arab to come
pull this thorny prick from our necks
We waited for single Qureishite
A single Hashemite
A single Don Quixote
A single local hero, for whom they did not shave the moustache
We waited for a Khalid .. Tariq .. or Antara
We were eaten chatter (while engaged in vain talk)
They sent a fax
We read its text
after paying tribute
and the end of the slaughter
10

What does Israel fear from our cries?
What does she fear from our faxes?
The Jihad of the fax is the weakest of Jihads
It is a single text we write
for all the martyrs who left

and all the martyrs those who will come

11

What does Israel fear from Ibn al-Muqaffa'?

Jarir and .. Farazdaq?

And Khansa throwing her poems at the gates of the cemetery

What does she fear if we burn tires

Sign communiqués

And destroy shops

And she knows that we have never been kings of war

But were kings of chatters

12

What does Israel fear

from the beating of the drums

the tearing of clothes

and the scratching of cheeks

What does she fear

when she hears

the stories of `Ad and Thamud?

13

We are in national comma

We did not receive

Since the times of conquest

a single mail

14

We are a people of made of dough

The more Israel increases in her killing and terrorism

the more we increase in idleness and coldness

15

A Smothering Dominion

A regional dialect that increases in ugliness

and a green union that grows in isolation

Summer trees, growing barren

And borders .. whenever the whim strikes

erase other borders

16

Israel should slaughter us, and why not?

She should erase Hisham, Ziyad and ar-Rashid, and why not?
[Why not?] and the Banu Taghlab lusting after their women
[Why not?] and Banu Mazen lusting after their slave boys
[Why not?] and Banu Adnan dropping their trousers to their knees
debating .. necking and .. the lips!

17

What should Israel fear from some of al-Arab
When they became Yehuda???

Nizar Qabbani

The Fortune Teller

She sat with fear in her eyes
Contemplating the upturned cup
She said 'Do not be sad, my son
You are destined to fall in love'
My son, Who sacrifices himself for his beloved,
Is a martyr

*

For long have I studied fortune-telling
But never have I read a cup similar to yours
For long have I studied fortune-telling
But never have I seen sorrows similar to yours
You are predestined to sail forever
Sail-less, on the sea of love
Your life is forever destined
To be a book of tears
And be imprisoned
Between water and fire

*

But despite all its pains,
Despite the sadness
That is with us day and night
Despite the wind
The rainy weather
And the cyclone
It is love, my son
That will be forever the best of fates

*

There is a woman in your life, my son
Her eyes are so beautiful
Glory to God
Her mouth and her laughter
Are full of roses and melodies
And her gypsy and crazy love of life
Travels the world
The woman you love
May be your whole world

But your sky will be rain-filled
Your road blocked, blocked, my son
Your beloved, my son, is sleeping
In a guarded palace
He who approaches her garden wall
Who enters her room
And who proposes to her
Or tries to unite her plaits
Will cause her to be lost, my son...lost

*

You will seek her everywhere, my son
You will ask the waves of the sea about her
You will ask the shores of the seas
You will travel the oceans
And your tears will flow like a river
And at the close of your life
You will find that since your beloved
Has no land, no home, no address
You have been pursuing only a trace of smoke
How difficult it is, my son
To love a woman
Who has neither land, nor home

Nizar Qabbani

The Hasteners

The last walls of shame fell,
And we rejoiced...
And we danced...
And we were blessed with the signing of the peace of the cowards...
Nothing terrifies us any more.
And nothing shames us.
For the veins of pride have dried within us.

Fell...
-For the fiftieth time-our virginity...
Without being shaken...or crying...
Or being terrified with the sight of blood...
We entered the age of haste...
And stood in lines, like sheep before the guillotine
We ran...and panted..
And raced to kiss the boots of the murderers..

For fifty years they starved our children
And at the end of the fast, they threw to us...
An onion..

Grenada fell
-For the fiftieth time-
From the Arabs' hands.
History fell from the Arabs' hands.
The pillars of the spirit fell...and the branches of the tribe...
All the songs of heroism fell...
Seville fell...
Antioch fell...
`Ammoriah fell.
Hittin fell without a fight.
Mary fell in the hands of the militias
And there is no man to rescue the heavenly symbol
And there is no manliness...

The last of our favorites fell
In the hands of the Romans, then what are we defending?
Not a single concubine remains in our palace...
Who makes coffee... and sex...
Then what are we defending??

No more remains in our hands...
A single Andulus that we possess.
They stole the doors,
And the walls,
And the wives, and the children,
And the olives, and the oil,
And the streets' cobbles.
They stole Jesus, son of Mary,
While he was still a suckling.
They stole from us the memory of the lemons...
And the apricots... and the mint.
And the lanterns of the mosques...

They left in our hands a can of sardines
Named (Gaza)...
A dried bone called (Jericho)
An inn called Palestine,
Without a roof and without pillars...
They left us a body without bones
And a hand without fingers...

There remain no ruins over which we cry
How can a nation cry...
From whom they took away the tears??

After this secret flirtation, in Oslo
We came out barren...
They granted us a homeland smaller than a grain of wheat...
A homeland we swallow without water
Like pills of aspirin!!...

After fifty years...
We sit now, on the destroyed land.
We have no shelter... like thousands of dogs!!...

After fifty years...
We do not find a homeland to dwell in
Except the mirage.
It is not a reconciliation...
That reconciliation which, like a dagger, was thrust into us...
It is an act of rape!!..

What use is the haste?
What use is the haste?
When the conscience of the people remains alive
Like the fuse of a bomb...
All the signatures of Oslo will not equal
A mustard seed!!...

How we dreamed of a green peace.
And a white crescent.
And a blue sea.
And spread sails...
And all of a sudden we found ourselves
In a dung heap!!..

Who will ask them
About the peace of the cowards??
Not the peace of the strong and able.
Who will ask them??
About the peace of selling by installments,
And renting by installments...
And the deals...
And the merchants... and the exploiters?
Who will ask them?
About the peace of the dead...
They silenced the street...
And assassinated all questions...
And all the questioners...

And we were married without love...
To the female who one day ate our children...
And chewed our livers...
We took her on a honeymoon.
And we drank... and we danced...
And we remembered all that we retain of the love poetry.
Then we begot-unfortunately-retarded children
They have the form of frogs...
And we were expelled to the sidewalks of sorrow,
without a country to embrace...
Or a child!!

There was no Arab dancing at the wedding
Or Arab food.
Or Arab singing.
Or Arab shame
The sons of the country were absent from the wedding parade.

Half of the dowry was in dollars...
The diamond ring was in dollars...
The court clerk's fee was in dollars...
The wedding cake was a gift from America...
And the wedding spread, and the flowers, and the candles,
And the Marines' music...
All were made in America.

The wedding was finished... and Palestine was not present at the
rejoicing.
But she saw her picture broadcasted over all channels...
And saw her tear traversing the ocean's waves...
Towards Chicago... and Jersey... and Miami
While like a slaughtered bird she cried
This wedding is not my wedding...
This dress is not my dress...
This shame is not my shame...
Never... America...
Never... America...

Never... America...

Nizar Qabbani

The Trial

The East receives my songs, some praise, some curse
To each of them my gratitude I bear
For I've avenged the blood of each slain woman
and haven offered her who is in fear.

Woman's rebellious heart I have supported
ready to pay the prize - content to die
if love should slay me, for I am love's champion
and if I ceased, then I would not be I.

Nizar Qabbani

The Wrathful

O pupils of Gaza . .
Teach us . . .
A little of what you have
For we have forgotten . . .
Teach us . .
To be men
For we have men . .
dough they become . . .
Teach us . .
How the rocks become
in the children's hands,
precious diamond . .
How it becomes
The child's bicycle, a mine
And the silk ribbon . .
An ambush . .
How the feeding bottle nipple . .
If detained not
Turns into a knife
O pupils of Gaza
Care not . .
about our broadcasts . .
And hear us not . .
Strike . .
Strike . . .
With all your powers
And firmly in your hands take matters
And ask us not . .
We the people of arithmetic . .
And of addition . .
And of subtraction . .
Your wars do carry on
And abstain from us . .
We're the deserters
from the service,
Your ropes do bring
And hang us . . .
We're mortals . .
Who possess not tombs

And orphans . .
who possess not masters
We kept already to our rooms . .
And we asked you
To fight the dragon . .
We've diminished, before you
A thousand century . .
And you've grown
-Within a month-Centuries . .
O pupils of Gaza . .
Return not . .
To our writings . .
And read us not..
We're your fathers . .
Do resemble us not . .
We're your idols . .
Do worship us not . .
We engage in
Political lies . .
And repression . .
And we build graves . .
And jails . .
Liberate us . .
From the fear problem in us . .
And expel
The opium from our heads . .
Teach us . .
The art of adherence to the Land,
And leave not . .
The Messiah saddened . .
O our beloved children
Salam . .
May Allah render your day
Jasmine . . .
From the cracks of ruined earth
You emerged forth
And planted in our wound
Musk rose . .
This is the revolution of notebooks . .
And ink . .
Do become on the lips
melodies . .

Shower us . .
Heroism, and pride
And from our ugliness wash us
Wash us . .
Fear neither Moses. .
Nor Moses' spell . .
And ready yourself
To harvest the olives
Verily this Jewish age
is an illusion . .
That shall collapse . .
Albeit sureness we possess . . .
O madmen of Gaza . .
A thousand welcome . . .
in madmen,
If they liberate us
Verily the age of political reason
has long bygone . . .
Do teach us madness . . .

Nizar Qabbani

Two African Breasts

Let me find time
to welcome in this love
that comes unbid.
Let me find time
to memorize
this face that rises
out of the trees
of forgetfulness.
Give me the time
to escape this love
that stops my blood.
Let me find time
to recognize your name,
my name,
and the place
where I was born.
Let me find time
to know where I shall die
and how I will revive, as
a bird inside your eyes.
Let me find time
to study the state of winds
and waves, to learn the maps
of bays. . .

Woman, who lodges
inside the future
pepper and pomegranate-seeds,
give me a country
to make me forget all countries,
and give me time
to avoid this Andalusian face,
this Andalusian voice,
this Andalusian death
coming from all directions.
Let me find time to prophesy
the coming of the flood.

Woman, who was inscribed

in books of magic,
before you came
the world was prose.
Now poetry is born.
Give me the time to catch
the colt that runs toward me,
your breast.
The dot over a line.
A bedouin breast, sweet
as cardamom seeds
as coffee brewing over embers,
its form ancient as Damascene brass
as Egyptian temples.

Let me find luck
to pick the fish that swim
under the waters.

Your feet on the carpet
are the shape and stance
of poetry.

Let me find the luck
to know the dividing line
between the certainty
of love and heresy.
Give me the opportunity
to be convinced I have seen
the star, and have been spoken to
by saints.

Woman, whose thighs are like
the desert palm where golden
dates fall from,
your breasts speak seven tongues
and I was made to listen
to them all.
Give me the chance
to avoid this storm,
this sweeping love,
this wintry air, and to be convinced,
to blaspheme, and to enter

the flesh of things.
Give me the chance
to be the one
to walk on water.

Nizar Qabbani

Verse

Friends

The old word is dead.

The old books are dead.

Our speech with holes like worn-out shoes is dead.

Dead is the mind that led to defeat.

2

Our poetry has gone sour.

Women's hair, nights, curtains and sofas

Have gone sour.

Everything has gone sour.

3

My grieved country,

In a flash

You changed me from a poet who wrote love poems

To a poet who writes with a knife

4

What we feel is beyond words:

We should be ashamed of our poems.

5

Stirred by Oriental bombast,

By boastful swaggering that never killed a fly,

By the fiddle and the drum,

We went to war,

And lost.

6

Our shouting is louder than our actions,

Our swords are taller than us,

This is our tragedy.

7

In short

We wear the cape of civilisation

But our souls live in the stone age

8

You dont win a war
With a reed and a flute.

9

Our impatience
Cost us fifty thousand new tents.

10

Dont curse heaven
If it abandons you,
Dont curse circumstances,
God gives victory to whom He wishes
God is not a blacksmith to beat swords.

11

It's painful to listen to the news in the morning
It's painful to listen to the barking of dogs.

12

Our enemies did not cross our borders
They crept through our weaknesses like ants.

13

Five thousand years
Growing beards
In our caves.
Our currency is unknown,
Our eyes are a haven for flies.
Friends,
Smash the doors,
Wash your brains,
Wash your clothes.
Friends,
Read a book,
Write a book,
Grow words, pomegranates and grapes,
Sail to the country of fog and snow.
Nobody knows you exist in caves.
People take you for a breed of mongrels.

14

We are a thick-skinned people
With empty souls.
We spend our days practicing witchcraft,
Playing chess and sleeping.
Are we the 'Nation by which God blessed mankind'?

15

Our desert oil could have become
Daggers of flame and fire.
We're a disgrace to our noble ancestors:
We let our oil flow through the toes of whores.

16

We run wildly through the streets
Dragging people with ropes,
Smashing windows and locks.
We praise like frogs,
Turn midgets into heroes,
And heroes into scum:
We never stop and think.
In mosques
We crouch idly,
Write poems,
Proverbs,
Beg God for victory
Over our enemy

17

If i knew I'd come to no harm,
And could see the Sultan,
This is what i would say:
'Sultan,
Your wild dogs have torn my clothes
Your spies hound me
Their eyes hound me
Their noses hound me
Their feet hound me
They hound me like Fate
Interrogate my wife
And take down the name of my friends.
Sultan,
When I came close to your walls

and talked about my pains,
Your soldiers beat me with their boots,
Forced me to eat my shoes.
Sultan,
You lost two wars,
Sultan,
Half of our people are without tongues,
What's the use of a people without tongues?
Half of our people
Are trapped like ants and rats
Between walls.'
If i knew I'd come to no harm
I'd tell him:
'You lost two wars
You lost touch with children.'

18

If we hadn't buried our unity
If we hadn't ripped its young body with bayonets
If it had stayed in our eyes
The dogs wouldn't have savaged our flesh.

19

We do not want an angry generation
To plough the sky
To blow up history
To blow up our thoughts.
We want a new generation
That does not forgive mistakes
That does not bend.
We want a generation of giants.

20

Arab children,
Corn ears of the future,
You will break our chains,
Kill the opium in our heads,
Kill the illusions.
Arab children,
Don't read about our suffocated generation,
We are a hopeless case.
We are as worthless as a water-melon rind.

Dont read about us,
Dont ape us,
Dont accept us,
Dont accept our ideas,
We are a nation of crooks and jugglers.
Arab children,
Spring rain,
Corn ears of the future,
You are the generation
That will overcome defeat.

Nizar Qabbani

We Are Accused Of Terrorism

We are accused of terrorism
If we dare to write about the remains of a homeland
That is scattered in pieces and in decay
In decadence and disarray
About a homeland that is searching for a place
And about a nation that no longer has a face

About a homeland that has nothing left of its great ancient verse
But that of wailing and eulogy

About a homeland that has nothing in its horizons
Of freedoms of different types and ideology

About a homeland that forbids us from buying a newspaper
Or listen to anything
About a homeland where all birds are always not allowed to sing
About a homeland that out of horror, its writers are using invisible ink

About a homeland that resembles poetry in our country
Improvised, imported, loose and of no boundaries
Of foreign tongue and soul
Detached from Man and Land, ignoring their plight as a whole

About a homeland to the negotiating table moves
Without a dignity or shoes

About a homeland
That no more has steadfast men
With only women therein

Bitterness is in our mouths□ our talk□ our eyes
Will draught also plague our souls as a legacy passed to us
from ancient times?

Our nation has nobody left, even the less glorified
No one to say 'NO' in the face of those who gave up our
home□ bread and butter
Turning our colorful history into a circus

We have not a single honest poem
That has not lost its virginity in a ruler's Harem

We grew accustomed to humiliation
Then what is left of Man
If he is comfortable with that?

I search the books of history
For men of greatness to deliver us from darkness
To save our women from fires' brutality

I search for men of yesterday
But all I find is frightened cats
Fearing for their souls
From the authority of rats

Are we hit by national blindness
Or are we suffering from color blindness

We are accused of terrorism
If we refuse to perish
Under Israeli tyranny
That is hampering our unity
Our history
Our Bible and our Quran
Our prophets' land
If that is our sin and crime
Then terrorism is fine

We are accused of terrorism
If we refuse to be wiped out
By barbarians, the Mongols or the Jews
If we choose to stone the fragile security council
Which was sacked by the king of caesuras

We are accused of terrorism
If we refuse to negotiate the wolf
And reach out for a whore

America is fighting the cultures of Man
Because it lacks one
And against the civilizations because it needs one

It is a gigantic structure but without a wall

We are accused of terrorism

If we refuse current times

Where America the arrogant the mighty the rich

Became a sworn interpreter of Hebrew.

Nizar Qabbani

When I Love

When I love
I feel that I am the king of time
I possess the earth and everything on it
and ride into the sun upon my horse.

When I love
I become liquid light
invisible to the eye
and the poems in my notebooks
become fields of mimosa and poppy.

When I love
the water gushes from my fingers
grass grows on my tongue
when I love
I become time outside all time.

When I love a woman
all the trees
run barefoot toward me...

Nizar Qabbani

When I Love You

When I love you
A new language springs up,
New cities, new countries discovered.
The hours breathe like puppies,
Wheat grows between the pages of books,
Birds fly from your eyes with tiding of honey,
Caravans ride from your breasts carrying Indian herbs,
The mangoes fall all around, the forests catch fire
And Nubian drums beat.

When I love you your breasts shake off their shame,
Turn into lightning and thunder, a sword, a sandy storm.
When I love you the Arab cities leap up and demonstrate
Against the ages of repression
And the ages
Of revenge against the laws of the tribe.
And I, when I love you,
March against ugliness,
Against the kings of salt,
Against the institutionalization of the desert.
And I shall continue to love you until the world flood arrives;
I shall continue to love you until the world flood arrives.

Nizar Qabbani

Words

He lets me listen, when he moves me,
Words are not like other words
He takes me, from under my arms
He plants me, in a distant cloud
And the black rain in my eyes
Falls in torrents, torrents
He carries me with him, he carries me
To an evening of perfumed balconies

And I am like a child in his hands
Like a feather carried by the wind
He carries for me seven moons in his hands
and a bundle of songs
He gives me sun, he gives me summer
and flocks of swallows
He tells me that I am his treasure
And that I am equal to thousands of stars
And that I am treasure, and that I am
more beautiful than he has seen of paintings
He tells me things that make me dizzy
that make me forget the dance and the steps

Words...which overturn my history
which make me a woman...in seconds
He builds castles of fantasies
which I live in...for seconds...
And I return...I return to my table
Nothing with me...
Nothing with me...except words

Nizar Qabbani

Your Body Is My Map

Raise me more love... raise me
my prettiest fits of madness
O' dagger's journey... in my flesh
and knife's plunge...
sink me further my lady...
the sea calls me
add to me more death ...
perhaps as death slays me... I'm revived
your body is my map...
the world's map no longer concerns me...
I am the oldest capital of sadness...
and my wound a Pharaonic engraving
my pain... extends like an oil patch
from Beirut... to China...
my pain... a caravan...dispatched
by the Caliphs of 'A'Chaam'... to China...
in the seventh century of the 'Birth'...
and lost in a dragon's mouth...
bird of my heart... 'naysani'
O' sand of the sea, and forests of olives
O' taste of snow, and taste of fire...
my heathen flavor, and insight
I feel scared of the unknown... shelter me
I feel scared of the darkness... embrace me
I feel cold... cover me up
tell me children stories...
rest beside me...
Chant to me...
since from the start of creation
I've been searching for a homeland to my forehead...
for a woman's hair...
that writes me on the walls... then erases me...
for a woman's love... to take me
to the borders of the sun... and throws me...
from a woman's lip... as she makes me
like dust of powdered gold...
shine of my life. my fan
my lantern. declaration of my orchards
stretch me a bridge with the scent of oranges...

and place me like an ivory comb...
in the darkness of your hair... then forget me
I am a drop of water... ambivalent
remaining in the notebook of October
your love crushes me...
like a mad horse from the Caucasus throwing me under its hoofs...
and gargles with the water of my eyes...
add to me more fury... add to me
O' prettiest fits of my madness
for your sake I set free my women
and effaced my birth certificate
and cut all my arteries...

Nizar Qabbani