

Classic Poetry Series

# Imru al Qays Ibn Hujr - poems -

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## Imru al Qays Ibn Hujr(500 - 550)

Imru` al-Qais bin Hujr al-Kindi (Arabic: إمرؤ القيس بن حُجر الكندي / ALA-LC: Imru' al-Qays ibn Hujr al-Kindi) was an Arabian poet in the 6th century AD, and also the son of one of the last Kindite kings. He is sometimes considered the father of Arabic poetry. His qaseeda, or long poem, "Let us stop and weep" (Arabic: إمرؤ القيس) is one of the seven Mu'allaqat, poems prized as the best examples of pre-Islamic Arabian verse. Imru' al-Qais was born in the Najd region of northern Arabia sometime in the early 6th century AD. His father was said to be Hujr bin al-Harith (حُجر بن الحارث / Hujr ibn al-Harith), the Kindah monarchy's regent over the tribes of Asad and Ghatfan, and it is believed that Imru' al-Qais was born in the territory of Asad. His mother was said to be Fatimah bint Rabi'ah al-Taghlibi (فاطمة بنت ربيعة التغلبية / Fa'imah bint Rani'ah al-Taghlibi).

Legend has it that Imru' al-Qais was the youngest of his father's sons, and began composing poetry while he was still a child. His father strongly disapproved of this habit in his son, believing poetry to be an unseemly pastime for the son of a king. His father also disapproved of Imru' al-Qais' scandalous lifestyle of drinking and chasing women, and eventually banished him from his kingdom, or so the legend goes. Later, when the tribe of Asad rebelled and assassinated his father, Imru' al-Qais was the only one of his brothers to take responsibility for avenging his death. Renouncing wine and women, he fought the tribe of Asad until he had exacted revenge in blood, and spent the remainder of his life trying to regain his father's kingdom.

Like many figures of early Arabia, which at that time lacked a formal writing system and relied on the oral transmission of stories, the details of the life of Imru' al-Qais are hard to determine with any certainty. Even so, historians have been able to compare the various stories written down by later biographers with clues from Imru' al-Qais' own poems and information about major historical events in the Persian and Byzantine empires to reconstruct a probable account of the life and ancestry of this most famous of the Jahili (pre-Islamic) poets.

According to one account, his full name and ancestry was Imru' al-Qais, son of Hujr, son of al-Harith, son of 'Amr, son of Hujr the eater of bitter herbs, son of Mu'awiyya, son of Thawr of the tribe of Kindah (Arabic: إمرؤ القيس بن حُجر الكندي بن الحارث بن عمرو بن حُجر العاتق بن معاوية بن ثور من بني كندة / إمرؤ القيس بن حُجر الكندي). He was also referred to as "The Lost King" (الملك المفقود / al-Malik al-Ma'fud), because he was never able to recover his father's throne.

# Mu'allaqa

A tribute

The elephant's trunk uncurling  
From the lightning flashes  
In the clouds was Marie Antoinette,  
As usual trumpeting.  
The greedy suction  
Was her tornado vacuuming across the golden Kansas flatness.

Meanwhile, the count was talking to the swan.  
The swan liked what he was saying and got  
Right out of the pond.  
Meanwhile, grown men in Afghanistan.  
The count had fought in Algeria.  
Meanwhile, neon in Tokyo.

Madame la Comtesse waved to us from the top step,  
Waved to her count, their swan, their ornamental pond, et moi.  
We were a towering cornucopia  
Of autumn happiness  
And gourmandise rotating counterclockwise,  
Backwards toward the guillotine.

I kept a rainbow as a pet and grandly  
Walked the rainbow on a leash.  
I exercised it evenings together with the cheetah,  
A Thorstein Veblen moment of conspicuous consumption:  
A dapper dauphin in a T-shirt that said FRED  
Parading with his pets decked out in T-shirts that said FRED'S.

I left my liver in the Cher.  
I ate my heart out en Berry.  
We drank and ate  
France between the wars,  
And every morning couldn't wait.  
It felt sunshiny in the shadow of the château.

And when the rainbow leapt from there to here,  
It landed twenty years away from the Cher.  
The place it landed was the Persian Gulf.

It landed twinkling stardust where I'm standing in my life  
With one-hump Marie Antoinette, my wife,  
Who resembles that disarming camel yesterday.

In fact, the camel yesterday was smitten.  
She left the other camels to come over.  
You have a lovely liquid wraparound eye.  
She stood there looking at me sideways.  
They feed their racing camels caviar in Qatar.  
The ruler of Dubai has said that he will try to buy Versailles.

A refrigerated ski slope, five stories high,  
Lives improbably inside a downtown shopping mall in Dubai.  
Arab men, wearing sneakers under their robes, hold hands.  
Faceless black veils stop shopping to watch through the glass.  
Seeing the skiers emphasizes the desert,  
Like hearing far-off thunder at a picnic.

Both the word thunder and the word picnic are of course Arabic.  
Indeed, Arabic was the language of French aristocrats  
Before the Terror, bad body odor perfumed.  
It is the language of the great Robert Frost poems,  
Which have the suicide bomber's innocence  
Walking safely past the checkpoint into the crowd.

They pay payola to Al Qaeda to stay away from Doha.  
The emir was in his counting-house, counting out his oil and gas.  
Another sunny Sunni day in the UAE!  
A candidate for president  
Who wants to manumit our oil-dependent nation  
First has to get the message to every oily girl and boy

To just say no to up and down and in and out, Labanotation  
Of moaning oil rigs extracting oil joy.  
My fellow Americans, I see a desert filled with derricks  
Pumping up and down but never satisfied:  
Obsessional hydraulics and Jimi Hendrix has hysterics.  
I smash my guitar to bits on stage and that's all, folks!

It isn't.  
I contemplate the end of the world. It isn't.  
I have my croissant and café and the Trib and walk the rainbow

Around the block.

The young North African hipsters in the bitter banlieues  
Contemplate the end of the world.

I contemplate the end of the world but in my case  
It's not.

There are still things to buy.

I walk the rainbow in the dark.

The world is the kiosk where I get my Herald Tribune.

The world is my local café where my café au lait is quadroon.

I go to the strange little statue of Pierre Mendès-France

In the Jardin du Luxembourg, in Paris, France.

I make a pilgrimage to it.

My quaint political saint and I visit.

The young North African hipsters in the bitter banlieues

Contemplate the end of the world, which isn't

The end of the world, though yes, quite true,

In Algeria and Afghanistan

Jihad is developing a dirty nuclear bomb

That smells like frangipani in flower

To keep Frangipani in power.

Ayatollah Frangipani has returned from his long exile in France

To annihilate vice.

I stomp the campfire out and saddle up my loyal Mayflower—

Who is swifter than a life is brief under the stars!

My prize four-wheel-drive with liquid wraparound eyes!

We ski the roller coaster ocean's up and down dunes.

We reach land at last and step on Plymouth Rock.

Imru al Qays Ibn Hujr

# The Poem Of Imru Al Qays

Stop, oh my friends, let us pause to weep over the remembrance of my beloved.  
Here was her abode on the edge of the sandy desert between Dakhool and  
Howmal.

The traces of her encampment are not wholly obliterated even now.  
For when the South wind blows the sand over them the North wind sweeps it  
away.

The courtyards and enclosures of the old home have become desolate;  
The dung of the wild deer lies there thick as the seeds of pepper.

On the morning of our separation it was as if I stood in the gardens of our tribe,  
Amid the acacia-shrubs where my eyes were blinded with tears by the smart  
from the bursting pods of colocynth.

As I lament thus in the place made desolate, my friends stop their camels;  
They cry to me 'Do not die of grief; bear this sorrow patiently.'

Nay, the cure of my sorrow must come from gushing tears.  
Yet, is there any hope that this desolation can bring me solace?

So before ever I met Unaizah, did I mourn for two others;  
My fate had been the same with Ummul-Huwairith and her neighbor Ummul-  
Rahab in Masal.

Fair were they also, diffusing the odor of musk as they moved,  
Like the soft zephyr bringing with it the scent of the clove.

Thus the tears flowed down on my breast, remembering days of love;  
The tears wetted even my sword-belt, so tender was my love.

Behold how many pleasant days have I spent with fair women;  
Especially do I remember the day at the pool of Darat-i-Juljul.<sup>2</sup>

On that day I killed my riding camel for food for the maidens:  
How merry was their dividing my camel's trappings to be carried on their camels.

It is a wonder, a riddle, that the camel being saddled was yet unsaddled!  
A wonder also was the slaughterer, so heedless of self in his costly gift!

Then the maidens commenced throwing the camel's flesh into the kettle;  
The fat was woven with the lean like loose fringes of white twisted silk.

On that day I entered the howdah, the camel's howdah of Unaizah!  
And she protested, saying, 'Woe to you, you will force me to travel on foot.'

She repulsed me, while the howdah was swaying with us;  
She said, 'You are galling my camel, Oh Imru-ul-Quais, so dismount.'

Then I said, 'Drive him on! Let his reins go loose, while you turn to me.  
Think not of the camel and our weight on him. Let us be happy.'

'Many a beautiful woman like you, Oh Unaizah, have I visited at night;  
I have won her thought to me, even from her children have I won her.'

There was another day when I walked with her behind the sandhills,  
But she put aside my entreaties and swore an oath of virginity.

Oh, Unaizah, gently, put aside some of this coquetry.  
If you have, indeed, made up your mind to cut off friendship with me, then do it  
kindly or gently.

Has anything deceived you about me, that your love is killing me,  
And that verily as often as you order my heart, it will do what you order?

And if any one of my habits has caused you annoyance,  
Then put away my heart from your heart, and it will be put away.

And your two eyes do not flow with tears, except to strike me with arrows in my  
broken heart.

Many a fair one, whose tent can not be sought by others, have I enjoyed playing  
with.

I passed by the sentries on watch near her, and a people desirous of killing me;  
If they could conceal my murder, being unable to assail me openly.

I passed by these people at a time, when the Pleiades appeared in the heavens,  
As the appearance of the gems in the spaces in the ornamented girdle, set with  
pearls and gems.

Then she said to me, 'I swear by God, you have no excuse for your wild life;  
I can not expect that your erring habits will ever be removed from your nature.'

I went out with her; she walking, and drawing behind us, over our footmarks,  
The skirts of an embroidered woolen garment, to erase the footprints.

Then when we had crossed the enclosure of the tribe,  
The middle of the open plain, with its sandy undulations and sandhills, we  
sought.

I drew the tow side-locks of her head toward me; and she leant toward me;  
She was slender of waist, and full in the ankle.

Thin-waisted, white-skinned, slender of body,  
Her breast shining polished like a mirror.



In complexion she is like the first egg of the ostrich-white, mixed with yellow.  
Pure water, unsullied by the descent of many people in it, has nourished her.

She turns away, and shows her smooth cheek, forbidding with a glancing eye,  
Like that of a wild animal, with young, in the desert of Wajrah.

And she shows a neck like the neck of a white deer;  
It is neither disproportionate when she raises it, nor unornamented.

And a perfect head of hair which, when loosened, adorns her back  
Black, very dark-colored, thick like a date-cluster on a heavily-laden date-tree.

Her curls creep upward to the top of her head;  
And the plaits are lost in the twisted hair, and the hair falling loose.

And she meets me with a slender waist, thin as the twisted leathern nose-rein of  
a camel.  
Her form is like the stem of a palm-tree bending over from the weight of its fruit.

In the morning, when she wakes, the particles of musk are lying over her bed.  
She sleeps much in the morning; she does not need to gird her waist with a  
working dress.

She gives with thin fingers, not thick, as if they were the worms of the desert of  
Zabi,  
In the evening she brightens the darkness, as if she were the light-tower of a  
monk.

Toward one like her, the wise man gazes incessantly, lovingly  
She is well proportioned in height between the wearer of a long dress and of a  
short frock.

The follies of men cease with youth, but my heart does not cease to love you.  
Many bitter counselors have warned me of the disaster of your love, but I turned  
away from them.

Many a night has let down its curtains around me amid deep grief,  
It has whelmed me as a wave of the sea to try me with sorrow.

Then I said to the night, as slowly his huge bulk passed over me,  
As his breast, his loins, his buttocks weighed on me and then passed afar,

'Oh long night, dawn will come, but will be no brighter without my love.  
You are a wonder, with stars held up as by ropes of hemp to a solid rock.'

At other times, I have filled a leather water-bag of my people and entered the  
desert,  
And trod its empty wastes while the wolf howled like a gambler whose family  
starves.

I said to the wolf, 'You gather as little wealth, as little prosperity as I.  
What either of us gains he gives away. So do we remain thin.'

Early in the morning, while the birds were still nesting, I mounted my steed.  
Well-bred was he, long-bodied, outstripping the wild beasts in speed,

Swift to attack, to flee, to turn, yet firm as a rock swept down by the torrent,  
Bay-colored, and so smooth the saddle slips from him, as the rain from a smooth  
stone,

Thin but full of life, fire boils within him like the snorting of a boiling kettle;  
He continues at full gallop when other horses are dragging their feet in the dust  
for weariness.

A boy would be blown from his back, and even the strong rider loses his garments.

Fast is my steed as a top when a child has spun it well.

He has the flanks of a buck, the legs of an ostrich, and the gallop of a wolf.  
From behind, his thick tail hides the space between his thighs, and almost sweeps the ground.

When he stands before the house, his back looks like the huge grinding-stone there.

The blood of many leaders of herds is in him, thick as the juice of henna in combed white hair.

As I rode him we saw a flock of wild sheep, the ewes like maidens in long-trailing robes;  
They turned for flight, but already he had passed the leaders before they could scatter.

He outran a bull and a cow and killed them both, and they were made ready for cooking;  
Yet he did not even sweat so as to need washing.

We returned at evening, and the eye could scarcely realize his beauty  
For, when gazing at one part, the eye was drawn away by the perfection of another part.

He stood all night with his saddle and bridle on him,  
He stood all night while I gazed at him admiring, and did not rest in his stable.

But come, my friends, as we stand here mourning, do you see the lightning?  
See its glittering, like the flash of two moving hands, amid the thick gathering clouds.

Its glory shines like the lamps of a monk when he has dipped their wicks thick in

oil.

I sat down with my companions and watched the lightning and the coming storm.

So wide-spread was the rain that its right end seemed over Quatan,  
Yet we could see its left end pouring down on Satar, and beyond that over  
Yazbul.

So mighty was the storm that it hurled upon their faces the huge kanahbul trees,  
The spray of it drove the wild goats down from the hills of Quanan.

In the gardens of Taimaa not a date-tree was left standing,  
Nor a building, except those strengthened with heavy stones.

The mountain, at the first downpour of the rain, looked like a giant of our people  
draped in a striped cloak.  
The peak of Mujaimir in the flood and rush of débris looked like a whirling  
spindle.

The clouds poured forth their gift on the desert of Ghabeet, till it blossomed  
As though a Yemani merchant were spreading out all the rich clothes from his  
trunks,

As though the little birds of the valley of Jiwaa awakened in the morning  
And burst forth in song after a morning draught of old, pure, spiced wine.

As though all the wild beasts had been covered with sand and mud, like the  
onion's root-bulbs.  
They were drowned and lost in the depths of the desert at evening.

Imru al Qays Ibn Hujr